

# The Promise and Limits of Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns\*

Resuf Ahmed<sup>†</sup> and Feyaad Allie<sup>‡</sup>

July 2025

## Abstract

Opposition parties struggle against populist incumbents who portray them as elite and out of touch, while often consolidating power to tilt electoral politics in their favor. How can the opposition respond? We conceptualize and examine leader-driven grassroots campaigns as an electoral strategy, focusing on the Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's 150-day Bharat Jodo Yatra. These campaigns aim to connect directly with voters and reshape the opposition's image. Using newly collected election data and a difference-in-differences design, we find that exposure to the yatra improved Congress' performance, though in spatially and temporally limited ways. Interviews and descriptive evidence demonstrate how these campaigns can improve perceptions of the opposition. An original survey of 3500 voters reveals that those who directly participated in the grassroots campaign experienced longer-term positive impacts. The findings underscore the potential and the challenges of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as a mobilization strategy for opposition parties facing powerful populist incumbents.

---

\*This study protocol has been approved by the Harvard University Institutional Review Board (Protocol: IRB23-1502). We are grateful to Yashwant Deshmukh, Gaura Shukla, and the CVoter team for fielding the phone survey. Sajwaar Khalid, Asad Malik, and Daksh Walia provided excellent research assistance. We thank Andrea Berlanda, Simon Chauhard, Poulomi Chakrabarti, Zuhad Hai, Varun Karekurna-Ramachandra, Andrea Marcucci, Shikhar Singh, Milan Vaishnav, and Rahul Verma for comments on previous drafts and Nishant Ranjan and Neelanjan Sircar for sharing data. We thank the participants of the APSA South Asia Pre-Conference, the Harvard Political Economy Workshop, the Paris School of Economics Seminar, and the HEC Lausanne seminar for their feedback.

<sup>†</sup>Ph.D. Candidate, HEC Lausanne, University of Lausanne, Email: [resuf.ahmed@unil.ch](mailto:resuf.ahmed@unil.ch).

<sup>‡</sup>Assistant Professor of Government, Harvard University Email: [feyaadallie@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:feyaadallie@fas.harvard.edu).

# 1 Introduction

Populist leaders have ascended to power across regions, often pitching themselves as aligned with the masses against the corrupt elite who are favored by opposition parties (Mudde 2004). These personalistic leaders often turn “politics into a war against supposedly craven and dangerous enemies” seeking to “induce their followers to rally around the leader and develop fervent emotional attachments” (Weyland 2024, 4). Empowered by this popular mandate, populist leaders can undermine democratic institutions from within, reshaping institutional rules to consolidate and preserve their power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Weyland 2024). Even when not overtly anti-democratic, such leaders commonly engage in illiberal practices that erode democratic norms and protections (Krastev 2007; Mudde 2019).

Increasingly, scholars have studied the ways to counter this rise of populism and its associated democratic backsliding ranging from aggressive or extra-institutional actions (Bourne 2023; Gamboa 2023) such as protests or even coups to more institutional responses, including electoral coalition building (Samet 2024; Ong 2022) and judicial intervention through litigation (Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Carrión 2022; Gamboa, García-Holgado and González-Ocantos 2024). Perhaps the most obvious yet elusive approach is for the opposition party to defeat the populist at the ballot box. Weyland (2025) notes “elections are, in principle, even more decisive by allowing for the termination of populist tenure and the recovery of liberal pluralism.” However, successful electioneering against an incumbent populist is challenging. Opposition parties often grapple with a pervasive narrative that they are out-of-touch with voters, face exclusion from the mainstream media platforms, and are widely perceived as electorally nonviable given the consolidated dominance of the populist incumbents. This raises a critical yet understudied question: How can opposition parties defeat incumbent populists at the ballot box?

We identify a key strategy that can be used broadly by parties across political contexts but is often employed by opposition parties confronting populists: leader-driven grassroots campaigns. This type of party-voter interaction involves a political leader’s extraordinary outreach to citizens with a non-electoral message and an effort to engage them directly. These campaigns aim to counteract negative narratives about the opposition, foster direct connections with citizens, and enhance the party’s perceived electoral viability. In many cases, this strategy is used for traditional party-building or election campaigning, but increasingly, opposition leaders have used it to counter the vulnerabilities they face against populist parties. From Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s Republican People’s Party (CHP) in Turkey and Lula da Silva’s Workers Party in Brazil to Freeman Mbewe’s Chadema in Tanzania and Peter Magayar’s Tisza Party in Hungary, opposition parties across diverse contexts have

adopted leader-driven grassroots mobilization as a strategic response to populist parties and their accompanying illiberal action.

We study this tactic in the context of India, the world's largest democracy, which stands out as a setting where leader-driven grassroots campaigns have a central role in reshaping political narratives. Rooted historically in Gandhi's Salt March in the 1930s as part of India's independence movement, padyatras or yatras (walking marches, journeys) serve as a means for party leaders to engage directly with citizens at the grassroots, influence political discourse, and cultivate mass support. We study an effort by the Congress party to counter its entrenched out-of-touch reputation and mobilize voter support following two consecutive national losses to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and electoral setbacks across several states.<sup>1</sup> The BJP used a populist strategy that effectively branded the Congress as inept, corrupt, and elitist, exacerbating the continued decline of the party (Naseemullah and Chhibber 2024; Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021). While not at the same level as some populists in Europe and Latin America, it has nonetheless engaged in tactics, including media suppression, exploiting electoral finance regulations, and mobilizing majoritarian sentiment (Varshney 2022; Tudor 2023; Allie 2025). In response, the Congress Party leader, Rahul Gandhi, undertook a 150-day-long march, the Bharat Jodo Yatra, across India with the stated goal of uniting India. Gandhi suggested that the Bharat Jodo Yatra (we refer to this as BJJ or yatra throughout the paper) represented an effort to listen to citizens' concerns and pitch an "alternate vision for the idea of India."<sup>2</sup> While there were certainly hopes in the party of an electoral impact, the yatra decidedly did not make an electoral pitch the way that a traditional electoral campaign would.

This paper investigates whether leader-driven grassroots campaigns can revitalize opposition party support in competitive electoral settings. We analyze the political effects of the Bharat Jodo Yatra (BJJ), a 150-day-long (September 2022– January 2023) cross-country march led by Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi, which aimed to reenergize party cadres and connect with voters directly. Specifically, we focus on understanding how voter exposure to the yatra and participation in the yatra impacted their political behavior. Drawing on geospatial data scraped from the party's social media and official daily schedules, we reconstruct the BJJ's route across India and validate it with local party officials. We merge

---

<sup>1</sup>News articles have pointed to the impact of the yatra (See Hindustan Times). Verma and Pratikshit (2024) discusses the role of the yatra as part of Congress' broader 2024 election strategy. Choudhary and Mishra (2024) begin to examine the impact of the yatra by comparing the 2019 and 2024 national elections at the Parliamentary Constituency level, allowing for a coarse research design to examine the impact. This paper moves beyond this existing work by theorizing the broader category of campaigns that the yatra is an example of, estimating the impact of the yatra in state and national elections, and investigating the mechanisms by which the yatra impacted political behavior through interviews and an original survey.

<sup>2</sup>BBC - Bharat Jodo Yatra: Rahul Gandhi's unity march ends in Kashmir Last Accessed on 18th June 2025

this data with electoral outcomes from three prior election cycles for the state and national elections held after the march, enabling a difference-in-differences analysis. We find that constituencies traversed by the BJV experienced an average increase of about 4 percentage points in Congress vote share in proximate state elections. While the national elections held eighteen months later show no overall effect, the march yielded significant gains, between 2.3 and 3.0 percentage points, in districts where Congress was the principal opposition to the BJP. These results suggest that exposure to personalized, leader-led mobilization efforts can *temporarily* enhance opposition electoral performance, particularly where party identity is already salient and uncontested within anti-incumbent coalitions.

To further understand the impact of voter exposure to the yatra, we examine whether there are spatial effects of the yatra. We collect geo-located polling station-level election results across two election cycles in the first state to hold an election after the yatra concluded (where we found overall effects in our first analysis). A difference-in-differences analysis shows that the electoral impact of the yatra was concentrated in polling stations located very close to the route. Together, the observational election data reveal that the yatra improved Congress' vote share but only under specific conditions: when elections were temporally proximate, when constituencies were spatially near the yatra route, and when Congress was the central opposition party. Drawing on interviews with Congress officials and voters, Google Search trends, and descriptive data on follow-up rallies, we identify three key mechanisms behind this exposure effect. First, as a leader-driven grassroots campaign, the yatra helped counter the elite narrative about the party. Second, it expanded voter outreach in a pro-incumbent environment. Finally, the yatra improved perceptions of the party's viability. These changes contributed to electoral improvements for the Congress.

We then investigate the individual-level impact of the yatra by studying participation in the yatra using an original telephone survey of about 3500 voters. First, we find that voters from across the political spectrum participated in the yatra. Among the respondents who reported that they participated in the yatra (attending a yatra event, walking with the yatra, etc.), 40% of them voted for the BJP in the 2019 election. Second, we find that respondents who participated in the yatra reported improved perceptions of the opposition, increased discourse about the Congress party, and higher engagement with the Congress party in the year after the yatra. The results underscore two strengths of leader-driven grassroots mobilization. First, they are capable of reaching voters outside of the opposition's core, such as those voters who previously supported the populist party. This offers a strategy for opposition parties to maintain their core supporters and bring in potential swing voters (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Cox and McCubbins 1986). Second, leader-driven campaigns can generate durable improvements in perceptions of the opposition, even a year after the

campaign, with voters who were directly engaged with the grassroots campaign.

This paper contributes to research on opposition responses to populists, campaigning in the Global South, party politics, and populism in South Asia. First, we contribute to a nascent but growing body of literature on how opposition parties can respond to populism and its associated democratic backsliding (Gamboa 2023; Cleary and Öztürk 2022; McCoy and Somer 2021; Riedl et al. 2024). The paper highlights how leader-driven grassroots mobilization can work as an electioneering tactic to counter the challenges that populists create for the opposition. Second, while a great deal of research uses campaigns as a way to understand ethnic politics in developing democracies (Ferree 2010; Posner 2005; Horowitz 2016; Arriola et al. 2024), this paper joins recent work that studies party campaigning in its own right in the Global South (Paget 2019; Brierley and Kramon 2020; Goyal 2024; Sheikh 2024). Third, scholarship on weakly institutionalized parties in the developing world highlights disadvantages such as high levels of electoral volatility, low voter linkages, and strong personalist leaders (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring 1999; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). Our findings highlight how a key component of weakly institutionalized parties—centralized party leaders—can be an advantage in helping to respond to populists through leader-driven grassroots campaigns, contributing to existing research on the advantages of weakly institutionalized parties (Levitsky 1998, 2003). In the context of India, while extensive research considers the decline of the Congress Party (Chhibber 2001; Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019; Hasan 2012; Dasgupta 2018; Jaffrelot and Kumar 2012), their attempts to rebuild are understudied. This paper examines the most recent high-profile attempt by the party leadership to mobilize mass support. Finally, with the resurgence of populism worldwide, scholars have largely focused on Latin America and Europe. This paper joins recent research on populism in South Asia (Subramanian 2007; Chacko 2018; Naseemullah and Chhibber 2024; Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021) but moves beyond the rise of populism to focus on opposition responses to it.

## 2 Opposition Strategies Against Populist Incumbents

While the rise of populism and democracy-eroding parties has received significant attention, scholars have paid comparatively less attention to how the opposition can respond effectively. A growing consensus suggests that moderate institutional strategies such as lobbying, litigation, legislating, and electioneering are the most effective opposition strategies (Weyland 2025; Gamboa 2023; Cleary and Öztürk 2022). These are contrasted with extra-institutional and extreme strategies such as coups and impeachment, which are generally more likely to fail (Gamboa 2023). While electoral defeat remains the most decisive

constraint on populist power, Weyland (2024) notes “defeating the reelection drive of an incumbent populist president is difficult.” In skewed electoral settings where the narrative of the opposition is that they are inept and elite, the opposition can be drawn to more radical and extra-institutional strategies. However, there are moderate institutional strategies that are available and uniquely capable of addressing the challenges that the opposition faces. We outline the key challenges that the opposition faces against populist parties, particularly those that engage in democratic erosion. We argue that leader-driven, grassroots electoral mobilization can be a promising moderate strategy to respond to populists in the electoral arena.

## 2.1 Opposition Party Challenges

Populist leaders emerge and often lead their parties to victory by highlighting the perceived shortcomings of representative democracy. This strategy works best under specific conditions. For instance, political system shocks, such as economic crises or corruption scandals, can increase dissatisfaction among the population with the status quo party (Handlin 2017). Global forces like economic globalization and rising inequality can both intensify voter discontent and destabilize traditional partisan alignments, thereby creating openings for populist outsiders (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty 2022). Polarization at both the voter and elite level can further generate conditions by which populist parties that engage in democratic backsliding can rise (Svolik 2020; Grillo and Prato 2023; Grillo et al. 2024). Yet the very process that facilitates the rise of populist actors poses distinctive challenges for opposition parties. As populists consolidate power and erode democratic institutions, the likelihood of electoral turnover diminishes. In what follows, we identify three core challenges faced by opposition parties seeking to unseat populists through electoral means.

First, the opposition is often burdened by the perception that it is disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens. Central to populist ideology is a binary moral division between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004). Populists argue that the political party in power represents elite interests and is disconnected from the mass public. This framing not only mobilizes a new electoral coalition but also facilitates the erosion of support for incumbent or mainstream parties. For example, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro branded the Worker’s Party as corrupt elites on his path to victory (Hunter and Power 2019). In the United States, Trump positioned establishment Democratic elites as having betrayed “true members of the nation in favor of minorities, immigrants and other putative outsiders” (Bonikowski 2019, 11). Once in power, populists continue to deploy this elite-versus-people rhetoric to delegitimize opposition forces. The persistence of this framing constrains the

opposition's ability to reclaim credibility and rebuild electoral coalitions.

Second, the opposition faces challenges in voter outreach due to attempts by populists, particularly the undemocratic ones, to control the political ecosystem. When in power, populist parties often concentrate control over the media and undermine independent outlets. For example, Fidesz in Hungary used laws to marginalize or eliminate critical media outlets and the PiS in Poland attacked public media and ultimately placed it under partisan control to use for propaganda (Grzymala-Busse 2019). Moreover, In India, under Modi, major news networks frequently avoid criticizing the ruling party, constrained by threats of state harassment and financial retaliation (Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019). At the same time, allied business elites have also acquired previously independent television channels, tightening the ruling party's grip over the media landscape. The resulting media asymmetry weakens the opposition's ability to communicate with the public and articulate a compelling alternative.

Third, as populist incumbents undertake democracy-eroding actions, voters may come to see their victory as inevitable, further dampening the opposition's prospects of winning back voters. Populists are often known to systematically manipulate elections by tilting the electoral playing field in their favor in a way that is not obviously fraudulent (Bermeo 2016). This involves actions such as unequal access to campaign finance, administrative interference in voter registration, and the intimidation or legal persecution of opposition candidates. In some cases, these tactics catalyze transitions toward competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010). When populist incumbents pursue these strategies, they can foster a sense of futility among opposition supporters, signaling that electoral competition is meaningless or unwinnable. For example, in the lead-up to Turkey's 2023 elections, Erdoğan used legal charges to ban the prominent Istanbul mayor, İmamoğlu, from contesting for national office. While the mayor appealed the decision, the opposition ultimately refrained from nominating him as their presidential candidate (Esen and Gümüşcu 2023). This episode likely signaled to voters that the opposition alliance lacked the institutional leverage to mount a viable electoral challenge, further discouraging support.

## 2.2 Opposition Response: Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns

How can opposition parties effectively confront the multifaceted challenges posed by populist incumbents, particularly those engaged in democratic erosion. Weyland (2025) notes that “where a personalistic plebiscitarian leader cannot tamper with the established rules and procedures...open contests have indeed been crucial for protecting democracy from danger” (Weyland 2025, 9). This observation underscores the enduring importance of electoral contestation as a frontline defense against democratic backsliding. We highlight a key electoral strategy that opposition parties have used across contexts: leader-driven grassroots

campaigns.

### 2.2.1 Conceptualizing Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns

At first glance, the strategy of a leader-driven grassroots campaign might appear paradoxical. On the one hand, the campaign is led from the top down by a prominent political leader, yet on the other hand, it involves bottom-up grassroots mobilization and citizen engagement. However, it is precisely the blending of centralized party leadership and mass-level participation that defines their core dynamic. We define a leader-driven grassroots campaign as a form of party-voter interaction where a leader engages in extraordinary outreach to citizens with a non-electoral message and an effort to reach citizens directly.

We identify four key components of a party-voter event that define what type of event it is. The components are: the key party actor, the voter audience, the pitch, and the typicality. The key party actor can be the leader, the candidate(s), or the party organization (i.e., party position-holders, the rank-and-file). The voter audience can be all citizens or party supporters. The pitch is based on both what the party says during the interaction with the voter and the timing of it. The pitch can be electoral (i.e., occurring during an election campaign or concerning why a citizen should vote for the party) or non-electoral (i.e., happening outside of an electoral campaign or concerning a broader ideological message). The event's typicality is typical when the event is very common and not out of the ordinary or atypical when it is rare and viewed as more extraordinary.

Using this criterion, leader-driven grassroots campaigns can be defined in the following way. First, the *key party actor* of a leader-driven grassroots campaign is the party leader as opposed to a candidate or members of the party organization. This allows the impact of the campaign to have resonance beyond a particular constituency or a particular candidate. Second, the *voter audience* of these campaigns is all citizens, rather than just supporters. Leader-driven grassroots campaigns involve the leader coming to citizens directly, often walking through their neighborhoods or leading meetings outside of their homes. This approach involves reaching citizens broadly. Third, the *pitch* of this type of party-voter event is non-electoral. While political parties may always have electoral goals when engaging with voters, their explicit pitch of what they are doing matters. For example, during leader-driven grassroots campaigns, the party often uses ideological or societal messaging rather than common electoral messages. Moreover, leader-driven grassroots campaigns happen outside of a normal election campaign time. The party intentionally uses the ostensibly non-electoral nature to try to make a broader ideological case about the value of the party. Fourth, in terms of *typicality*, a leader-driven grassroots campaign is very atypical. The event itself does not happen often and involves a leader taking time to reach out to voters in an extraordinary

manner. Often, this involves walking on foot or traveling by vehicle across a long area to engage with citizens. Table 1 shows how leader-driven grassroots campaigns compare on these dimensions to three other party-voter events: rallies, canvassing, and town halls. While rallies, canvassing, and town halls have all received scholarly attention, leader-driven grassroots campaigns remain understudied.

Table 1: Typology of Party-Voter Events

|                         | Leader-Driven<br>Grassroots Campaigns                 | Rallies   | Canvassing   | Town Halls                                    |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| <b>Key Party Actor</b>  | Party Leader  | Party Leader or Candidates                                | Party Organization                                     | Candidates                                    |
| <b>Voter Audience</b>   | All citizens  | Supporters  | All citizens   | Supporters                                    |
| <b>Pitch</b>            | Non-Electoral   | Electoral   | Electoral or Non-electoral                             | Electoral or Non-Electoral                    |
| <b>Typicality</b>       | Atypical  | Typical   | Typical  | Typical                                       |
| <b>Indian Examples</b>  | Bharat Jodo Yatra                                     | Modi rally  | Door-to-door campaign                                  | Nukkad Sabhas                                 |
| <b>General Examples</b> | Justice March (Turkey)<br>One Million Steps (Hungary) | Trump rallies <sup>1</sup><br>Hitler rallies <sup>2</sup> | François Hollande's door-to-door campaign <sup>3</sup> | Deliberation town halls in Benin <sup>4</sup> |

<sup>1</sup> See [Snyder and Yousaf \(2020\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> See [Selb and Munzert \(2018\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> See [Pons \(2018\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> See [Wantchekon and Guardado \(2024\)](#).

## 2.2.2 Why Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns Can Work Against a Populist Incumbent

Leader-driven grassroots campaigns allow the party leader to engage directly with voters, generate enthusiasm and visibility for the party, and importantly, reverse perceptions of the party’s defeat as being inevitable. This can help *any* party engage in party building and voter engagement. However, because leader-driven grassroots campaigns address key challenges that opposition parties face when contesting elections against democracy-eroding populists, it is often used by opposition parties.

First, because populists frame the opposition as elite and disconnected, opposition leaders must actively reconnect with voters and demonstrate responsiveness to popular concerns. Leader-driven grassroots campaigns involve opposition party leaders traveling extensively across the country, meeting voters in their communities, and listening to their grievances. For example, in the 2020 election in Tanzania, Freeman Mbewe, the chairman of the opposition party Chadema, engaged in leader-driven grassroots campaigns. The ruling CCM under John Magufuli in Tanzania used populist “elite versus the masses” rhetoric along with engaging in democratic backsliding tactics ([Paget 2019](#)). Mbewe’s “walking rallies” in which he connected directly with citizens on the ground and sought to counter the opposition’s elite image. When he was stopped by the police force, he said “how can I not speak to the people while they stop me and want to speak with me” highlighting his effort to connect with citizens while security forces wanted to stop him ([Kwayu 2023](#), 266). Similarly, in Brazil,

Lula da Silva's Caravan of Hope tour was designed to mobilize grassroots supporters and ensure a coordinated strategic response by the Workers' Party to populist threats with the needs of the people rather than a bureaucratic approach.<sup>3</sup>

Second, leader-driven grassroots campaigns can generate critical visibility and public attention for opposition parties, particularly in environments where populist incumbents have monopolized or suppressed independent media. When opposition leaders march across the country, it is often a spectacle that can generate buzz around the party and the leader. Even if the populist-controlled media seek to marginalize or ignore opposition activities, the fact that they are engaging in a high-visibility spectacle can force wider coverage both within and outside the country. For example, during the Justice March in Turkey, while the state-run media highlighted the march as a threat to public order, independent and international media provided favorable and extensive coverage.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, segments of the march were live streamed and spread across social media platforms. Moreover, in May 2025, Peter Magyar from the Tisza Party, the key opposition to Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, walked 300 kilometers from Budapest to Oradea, Romania (a city with cultural ties to Hungarian) as part of the One Million Steps for Peace and National Unity March.<sup>5</sup> The march drew widespread media attention in a constrained pro-Fidesz environment, engaged Hungarians in Romania who often vote in Hungarian elections, and led to reports that Tisza would have enough support to defeat Fidesz today. The combination of positive and negative coverage of these marches allowed the opposition to break through restrictive media and reach a wider audience.

Third, leader-driven grassroots campaigns can signal to voters that the opposition is not completely nonviable as a political option. As populists tilt the electoral playing field, voters may perceive supporting the opposition as a lost cause. In this context, opposition leaders traveling across broad geographic regions communicate the presence of resilient party infrastructure and organizational strength. For example, Chadema's walking rallies in Tanzania were perceived as only possible due to deep party-building efforts at the grassroots level ([Kwayu 2023](#)). Similarly, Lula's Caravan of Hope was seen as returning to the grassroots mobilization that originally forged the Worker Party from a mass movement ([Keck 1986](#)). By engaging in a leader-driven grassroots campaign, opposition parties can demonstrate their organizational capacity and present themselves as credible alternatives to populist incumbents.

Across contexts, opposition parties have engaged in leader-driven grassroots mobilization in their electoral attempt to defeat a populist party, especially one engaged in democratic

---

<sup>3</sup>[Lula Goes Back to His Roots in Effort to Win Once Again Brazil's Presidency](#)

<sup>4</sup>[A Long March for Justice in Turkey](#)

<sup>5</sup>[Magyar's million steps to Romania — and to power in Hungary?](#)

erosion. This tactic is not unique to only opposition parties or parties that are facing a populist, but they are often used in this context because they address the core challenges that the opposition faces when taking on a populist. Moreover, by nature of not being in government, the opposition parties lack access to executive resources and institutional levers that could be used to influence voters. Consequently, grassroots mobilization emerges as a more viable and strategic avenue to engage the electorate, an arena where populist incumbents, preoccupied with governing responsibilities, may invest comparatively less effort.

While leader-driven grassroots campaigns address several key challenges that the opposition faces and therefore could produce electoral gains, several factors may limit the impact. First, the populist incumbent's grip on their voter base may be too entrenched for such campaigns to significantly sway public opinion. Second, swing voters, those most likely to shift allegiance, may not actively participate in these grassroots efforts, which instead might primarily engage individuals already aligned with the opposition. Furthermore, realizing substantive gains from leader-driven grassroots mobilization likely requires sustained, wide-ranging engagement rather than isolated, episodic efforts. These countervailing dynamics create ambiguous expectations regarding both the effectiveness of these campaigns in altering electoral outcomes and the conditions under which their impact might be limited

### 3 Context: The Indian National Congress and the Bharat Jodo Yatra

We examine the use of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as an opposition strategy in response to a populist incumbent in India, the world's largest democracy. We focus on how the opposition Congress Party sought to make electoral inroads against the Bharatiya Janata Party through Rahul Gandhi's 2022-2023 *Bharat Jodo Yatra* ("Unite India March"). We begin by situating the yatra within the broader political and institutional context in which it emerged. We then explain how the yatra functioned as a leader-driven grassroots campaign and how it sought to address key vulnerabilities faced by opposition parties challenging populist incumbents.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.1 The Decline of the Congress and the Rise of the BJP

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 with the goal of demanding representation in the government for educated Indians (Kumar 2024). The initial decades of the

---

<sup>6</sup>While we focus on the Congress Party's effort to take on the populist BJP, it is the case that Congress could also use populist strategies in their campaigning. For instance, Chhibber (2024), notes that Rahul Gandhi functioned as a populist figure for India's middle class in the 2024 election. Our theoretical argument does not preclude the ability for the opposition to also take on some populist tactics.

Congress focused on an “intellectual agitation” to articulate its demands and goals (Kothari 1964). By the 1920s and 1930s, the party had transformed into “a mass movement with depth and traditions,” a shift largely driven by Gandhi’s grassroots mobilization efforts that united citizens across ethnic and regional lines (Kothari 1964; Kumar 2024; Bhavnani and Jha 2014).

Scholars have long characterized India’s party system around the electoral centrality of the Congress Party since Independence (Yadav 1999; Vaishnav and Hintson 2019). In the two decades following 1947, Congress functioned as a “party of consensus,” despite its dependence on particular social coalitions across states (Kothari 1964; Weiner 1967). A fragmented opposition enabled Congress to dominate both national and state elections during this period (Vaishnav and Hintson 2019; Yadav 1999). The Congress party’s primary competition was not from the opposition parties but from factions within the party itself (Brass 1965; Kochanek 1968), which the party was able to manage well in this period (Weiner 1967; Kothari 1964).

From 1967-1989, the INC began to lose out at the state level but retained dominance nationally, even recovering after its defeat following Indira Gandhi’s moment of authoritarianism during the Emergency (Yadav 1999). During this phase, the Congress Party increasingly came to depend on its control over state institutions to distribute patronage, marking a departure from its earlier identity as a mass movement (Wilkinson 2007; Chhibber 2001). For example, Chhibber (2001) notes how Congress party workers became attuned to the role of resources in mobilizing votes, making their motivations for joining the party more reflective of self-interest than of influencing policy. Wilkinson (2007) notes that as competition intensified, clientelism became both more extensive and more systematic.

Between 1989 and 2014, the rise of caste-based, religious, and class mobilization disrupted Congress’s status as “the single pole around which politics revolved” (Vaishnav and Hintson 2019) and prominent regional parties gained more power (Ziegfeld 2016). A confluence of factors contributed to Congress decline: ideological incoherence (Chhibber and Verma 2018; Hasan 2022), weakened organizational structure (Kothari 1964; Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019; Hasan 2012), persistent intra-party factionalism (Brass 1965), rising opposition coordination (Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019), sociopolitical shifts induced by the Green Revolution (Dasgupta 2018), and the rise of new political identities (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2012). In 2014 and 2019, Congress suffered two consecutive major losses to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the national level, ushering in the fourth party system with the BJP at the center of politics (Vaishnav and Hintson 2019; Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020).

The BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi exhibited common elements of populism. The party was founded in 1980 but its institutional roots go further back to the Bharatiya

Jana Sangh and its organizational roots to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (Thachil 2014). The current version of the BJP under Modi came to power at the national level in 2014. In this election, Modi employed a classic populist framing: portraying the Congress Party as a corrupt elite and himself as the authentic voice of the masses (Jaffrelot 2021). By 2019 when the BJP won its second victory, Modi and the BJP continued to exhibit populist elements while also taking a turn to democracy-limiting behavior that often accompanies populists. Modi continued to pitch himself as representing the masses, which was increasingly pitched as the Hindu majority, further highlighting the party's Hindu nationalist ideology (Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021; Leidig and Mudde 2023). Alongside this majoritarian rhetoric, the BJP curtailed space for dissent by tightening controls over civil society and the press and enacting changes to campaign finance regulations that disproportionately advantaged the ruling party (Tudor 2023; Varshney 2022).

In this context, opposition parties, especially the Congress, entered the 2024 national elections and several key state contests facing formidable constraints. The BJP's populist messaging cast the opposition as disconnected elites, while a constrained political environment and growing perceptions of the ruling party's dominance contributed to the widespread belief that the opposition lacked electoral viability.

### **3.2 The Bharat Jodo Yatra as a Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaign**

Rahul Gandhi led the Bharat Jodo Yatra, or “Unite India March” with his stated goal to bring the country together and connect with citizens at the grassroots. Gandhi traveled over 4000 kilometers (about 2500 miles) on foot for over 150 days between September 2022 and January 2023 from the southern tip of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu to the northern point of Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir.

We conceptualize the Bharat Jodo Yatra as a leader-driven grassroots campaign based on the four criteria outlined in the theoretical section. First, the yatra's key party actor was Rahul Gandhi, the most prominent Congress Party leader. This meant that yatra was seen as a broader Congress Party effort.

Second, the voter audience for the yatra was all citizens, not just Congress supporters. During the yatra, Gandhi walked across the country to meet all types of citizens. The yatra involved a range of interactions such as larger speeches, walking with citizens, and corner meetings, all of which allowed the party to reach a wide set of voters and not just INC supporters.

Third, the BJJ had an explicitly non-electoral pitch. The yatra was conducted outside of

a formal campaign period. The closest it was to a state election was 7 months. In fact, while there were state elections in Gujarat during December 2022 when the yatra was happening, it did not cross that state at all. Moreover, Gandhi described the campaign as an effort to listen to citizens' concerns and present an "alternate vision for the idea of India" rather than an electoral campaign.<sup>7</sup> The INC research team provided Gandhi with a memo about "key issues in the region" to help direct the topics he covered.<sup>8</sup> Topics included state and local issues in the area, such as land distribution, health facilities, and national highways. At its core, the BJV focused publicly on the goal of connecting to citizens and their issues and presenting an ideological message rather than providing an electoral message.

Fourth, the yatra was atypical. While (pada)yatras, or marches on foot, hold deep historical, cultural, and political importance in India, this type of party-voter engagement remains extraordinary. Perhaps the most famous yatra remains Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930, a non-violent protest against the British salt tax that galvanized mass participation and drew international attention to India's independence movement (Bhavnani and Jha 2014). Gandhi's yatra demonstrated the power of grassroots mobilization, setting a precedent for using yatras as tools for political activism and engagement. In post-independent India, yatras have continued to play a significant role. Even while politicians have used the tactic over time, they continue to be a spectacle for voters and an extraordinary political event. For example, L.K. Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990 involved a vehicle with religious chariot decorations traveling across parts of the country to reach voters. The Rath Yatra mobilized support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and played a pivotal role in expanding the BJP's political base, marking a significant moment in the rise of Hindu nationalism (Blakeslee 2018; Kalra 2021). Other yatras that attracted citizens' attention and represented an atypical form of party-voter engagement include Narendra Modi's Gujarat Gaurav Padyatra in 2002,<sup>9</sup> Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy three-month-long yatra in Andhra Pradesh,<sup>10</sup> and Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy 430-day padayatra from 2017 to 2019.<sup>11</sup> These contemporary yatras, across parties and ideologies, highlight that the yatras continue to be a way to engage voters outside of traditional party activity. In the case of the BJV, the event was especially seen as atypical because Rahul Gandhi had never engaged in this form of mobilization before and was, in fact, often chided by his political opponents for often being outside of the country.

As a leader-driven grassroots campaign, the Bharat Jodo Yatra aimed to serve three strategic functions: to counter the perception of Congress as an elite and disconnected party

<sup>7</sup>BBC - Bharat Jodo Yatra: Rahul Gandhi's unity march ends in Kashmir Last Accessed on 18th June 2025

<sup>8</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

<sup>9</sup>Times of India - Modi Kicks off Gujarat Gaurav Yatra

<sup>10</sup>Times of India - YSRs Padyatra to begin on April 9

<sup>11</sup>India Today - YS Jagan all set to embark on his 3000 KM long Padyatara in Andhra Pradesh

by facilitating direct engagement with voters; to generate media attention and public visibility in a context where mainstream outlets favored the incumbent; and to signal electoral viability by challenging the narrative of inevitable defeat in a structurally imbalanced political arena.

## 4 Data and Empirical Approach

We examine the impact of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as an opposition party strategy against a populist incumbent by analyzing the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Specifically, our main analysis estimates the causal impact of the Yatra on electoral support for the Congress. Given our interest in both the promise and limits of this strategy, we focus on understanding the extent to which its impact is temporally and geographically bounded. In this section, we outline our data collection procedures and research design.

### 4.1 Bharat Jodo Yatra Route

The Indian National Congress formally announced the Bharat Jodo Yatra on August 23, 2023. The official social media account (Facebook and X/Twitter) of Bharat Jodo Yatra released a schedule of daily on-foot journeys by Rahul Gandhi. Figure 1 shows an example of a schedule for November 19, 2022. We manually mapped this daily schedule from September 7, 2022, to January 30, 2023, every day. The Yatra covered approximately 20 kilometers per day, with five to six designated stops each day. Because the Yatra followed major highways, we connected these stops to construct a continuous, 4,000+ kilometer route representing the Bharat Jodo Yatra. To ensure accuracy, we triangulated this route using three sources: contemporaneous newspaper reports, official social media feeds from the Congress party, and the live stream of the Yatra on YouTube to account for any changes based on what social media had initially put out. We then validated our constructed route with the Indian National Congress. We use this route to identify “treated” electoral constituencies or places where the yatra crossed. We identify treatment at the assembly constituency (AC) level for our main analysis. This is the smallest, electorally meaningful unit for party-based electoral politics.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Assembly constituencies are state-level electoral districts.



Figure 1: BJJ Schedule Example

The process of selecting the yatra route and stops was not random and rather involved input from Rahul Gandhi, Congress leaders, and members of the party organization. In Appendix A, Tables A.1 and A.2, we show how yatra and non-yatra constituencies differ based on variables from the election prior to the yatra for both state and national elections. In both state and national elections, yatra constituencies had significantly higher Congress vote share and in national elections, yatra constituencies were more likely to experience a Congress win. These differences are in line with our fieldwork. Interviews with Congress party functionaries suggested that the yatra focused on places where voters “could be receptive to the party.”<sup>13</sup> This meant that in places with a strong party organization, local party leaders may have been better able to present the case for why the yatra should pass through their constituency. Moreover, state-level leaders also jockeyed to have the yatra spend a longer time in their state. At the same time, given that the yatra traveled along a major highway where a large group of people could march, some locations were also selected for convenience. Because of the inherent differences in the types of places where INC did and did not travel through during the yatra, our empirical approach does not rely on the claim that the yatra route was random.

## 4.2 Congress Electoral Performance

Our goal is to examine the impact of the yatra on Congress’ electoral performance in the subsequent state and national elections. At the national level, India uses a parliamentary system where voters elect members of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, every 5 years. The party or coalition with the most seats forms the government and its leader becomes the Prime Minister. At the state level, the same electoral rules apply as voters

<sup>13</sup>Author interview with Congress leader. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

elect Members of the Legislative Assembly with the majority party or coalition forming the state government and determining the Chief Minister. Both state and national elections use first-past-the-post electoral rules.

During the Bharat Jodo Yatra, Rahul Gandhi traveled across India between September 2022 and January 2023. In the period following the Yatra, state assembly elections were held in Karnataka (May 2023), Telangana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh (all in December 2023), and Andhra Pradesh (May 2024). National parliamentary elections were conducted between April and June 2024.<sup>14</sup> Figure 2 presents a timeline of the Yatra and the elections to facilitate visual interpretation of the temporal relationship between the Yatra and electoral outcomes.



Figure 2: Timeline of BJV and Elections

**State Assembly Election:** The state assembly election results data for the states of Karnataka (2008, 2013, 2018), Madhya Pradesh (2008, 2013, 2018), Rajasthan (2008, 2013, 2018), Telangana (2009, 2014, 2018), and Andhra Pradesh (2009, 2014, 2019) are accessed from Trivedi Centre for Political Data (TCDP) (Agarwal et al. 2022).<sup>15</sup> For the most recent elections, Karnataka (2023), Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana (2023), and Andhra Pradesh (2024), we scraped official results from the Election Commission of India. We restrict our analysis to elections held after 2008, as earlier results are not comparable due to changes in constituency boundaries following delimitation.

**National Election:** We collect national election results at the assembly constituency level.<sup>16</sup> There are 543 Parliamentary constituencies in India and within these there about 5-9 assembly constituencies (AC). Using AC-level results for the national elections allows us more

<sup>14</sup>Between the yatra and the 2024 national elections, there were also state elections in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Odisha; however, the yatra did not cross through any of these states.

<sup>15</sup>For the state elections analysis, we standardize the years to 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2023. For the state of Telangana, the elections are 2009, 2014, 2018, and 2023. In all figures and tables, we will use 2008 for the 2009 election and 2013 for 2014 to keep the constituency with the other three states. For the state of Andhra Pradesh, the elections are 2009, 2014, 2019, 2024. In all figures and tables, we move these back by one year to allow for consistency in plotting.

<sup>16</sup>We do not have AC level data for the following states: Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh.

fine-grained data to understand the impact of the yatra.<sup>17</sup> The AC level results for the Lok Sabha election give us votes polled by each candidate at the AC level from TCDP for the years 2009, 2014, and 2019 (Agarwal et al. 2022). For AC level results for 2024, we scrape, OCR and manually code the vote share for the Congress candidate for each assembly constituency from the election commission website for each state.<sup>18</sup> As with our state-level analysis, we limit our focus to elections conducted after 2008 due to changes in constituency boundaries following delimitation.

### 4.3 Research Design

Our main empirical specification estimates the causal effect of exposure to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress' electoral performance, measured by vote share at the assembly constituency (AC) level. We focus on Congress vote share as the primary outcome and report results on the probability of a Congress victory in the Appendix (Tables B.2 and B.4). The analysis relies on a standard difference-in-differences framework:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(BJY_i \times Post_t) + \gamma_i + \theta_t + \delta_s \times t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

$Y_{it}$  denotes vote share for Congress in constituency  $i$  during election year  $t$ .  $BJY_i$  dummy takes the value 1 if the yatra passes through constituency  $i$ .  $Post_t$  equals 1 if the election was held after the yatra.  $\gamma_i$  and  $\theta_t$  are constituency and election year fixed effects, respectively. We include state-specific linear time trends indicated by  $\delta_s \times t$  to account for state-level factors that might evolve differently over time in our analysis of the national elections which includes 27 states. We cluster our standard errors at the AC level, which is the level at which treatment is defined. The coefficient of interest,  $\beta_1$ , captures the average treatment effect of the yatra on INC vote share. Our identification strategy relies on the parallel trends assumption: in the absence of the yatra, treated and untreated constituencies would have experienced similar trends in Congress vote share. We assess the validity of this assumption by presenting an event study analysis in the results section. Figure 3 shows the BJJ route and the treated and control constituencies for the state and national election analysis. It is important to note that our empirical design does not test the effect of the yatra happening on Congress vote share, but rather the impact of exposure to the yatra on voter behavior.

---

<sup>17</sup>In Appendix B.2, in Tables B.3, B.4, and B.5 we also present results at the PC level.

<sup>18</sup>We use the Form 20 polling station results to determine the vote share for Congress in each AC.

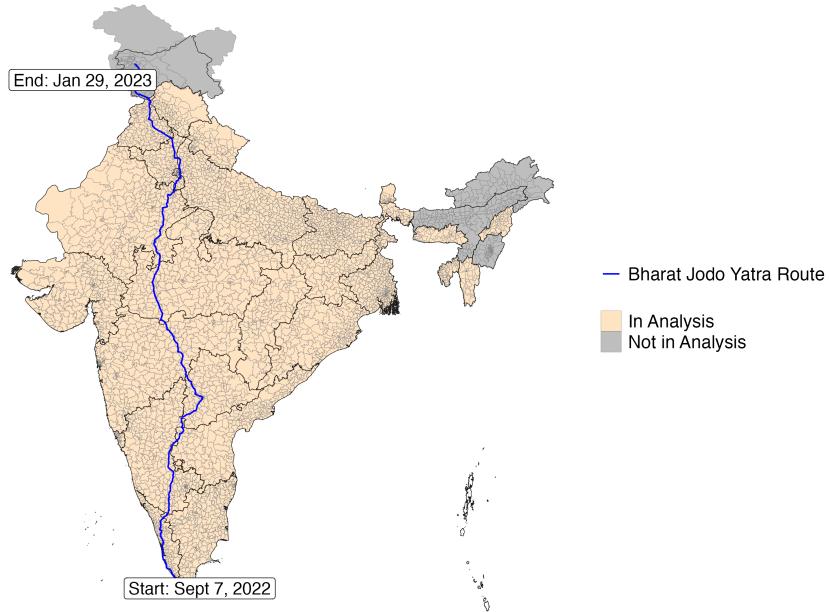


Figure 3: BJJ Route and States in Analysis

## 5 The Electoral Impact of the Bharat Jodo Yatra

We test how exposure to the yatra impacted the electoral outcomes for the Congress party in state and national elections. We focus on Congress vote share as our primary outcome; however, we report results related to the likelihood of a Congress win in Appendix B.2, Table B.4 and Appendix B.1, Table B.2. We further collect polling station-level data from the first election after the yatra to examine the spatial limits of leader-driven grassroots campaigns.

### 5.1 State Elections

We estimate the effect of the yatra on state legislative assembly elections, concentrating on five states in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh where the yatra traversed and elections were held. We report the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share in Table 2. In Model 1, focusing on all five states, the yatra increased the INC's vote share by 3.39 percentage points, equivalent to an increase of about one-fifth of a standard deviation. When disaggregating the analysis by the timing of elections, we find that the effect is concentrated in races held approximately seven months after the yatra passed through the state, namely, the Karnataka elections. By the time of the electoral races 11 months and onward after the election (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh elections), the estimated effects on Congress vote share are small and statistically

insignificant. In Karnataka, constituencies traversed by the yatra experienced a 4.49 percentage point increase in INC vote share—representing a 12% gain relative to the state’s average Congress vote share. The event study in Figure 4 confirms the parallel trends assumption for the positive and statistically significant effects observed in elections held seven months after the yatra.

In Table B.1 in Appendix B.1, we examine how the distance to the yatra (measured from the distance of the route to the centroid of a constituency) affects Congress vote in state elections.<sup>19</sup> This design presumes that as we move further from the yatra route, voters are less likely to be exposed to the yatra.<sup>20</sup> Similar to the results in Table 2, we observe an aggregate effect for all state elections, primarily driven by the Karnataka state elections, where the elections were held 7 months after the yatra. In Karnataka, the result suggests that greater distance from the yatra route is associated with lower Congress vote share.

We also examine the impact of the yatra on the likelihood of the INC winning in a constituency in Table B.2 in Appendix B.1. Again, we find an increased likelihood of a Congress win, an effect concentrated in the Karnataka sample. Across both sets of analyses, consistent with our findings on the vote share, we find no impact for the elections held 11 months or more after the yatra. It is important to note that in the Karnataka state elections, the BJP was viewed as corrupt and ineffective, facing an uphill battle in the 2023 elections.<sup>21</sup> This may have set the context for Congress to see vote share improvements. However, we still see that Congress performed better in places where the yatra crossed.

Table 2: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in State Elections

|                         | DV: Congress Vote Share |                                |                                    |                                 |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                         | all state elections     | elections 7 months since yatra | elections 11-13 months since yatra | elections 19 months since yatra |
|                         | (1)                     | (2)                            | (3)                                | (4)                             |
| $BJY_i \times Post_t$   | 3.39***<br>(1.26)       | 4.49**<br>(2.05)               | -0.11<br>(1.44)                    | 0.20<br>(0.89)                  |
| Observations            | 3747                    | 891                            | 2160                               | 696                             |
| Year FEs                | ✓                       | ✓                              | ✓                                  | ✓                               |
| AC FEs                  | ✓                       | ✓                              | ✓                                  | ✓                               |
| Number of Clusters (AC) | 948                     | 224                            | 549                                | 175                             |
| Mean of DV              | 32.29                   | 38.38                          | 36.57                              | 11.24                           |

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

<sup>19</sup>In Table B.7, we show that the distance results are robust to using Conley Standard Errors to adjust for errors being correlated across units that are geographically close to each other.

<sup>20</sup>This design is preferable to comparing yatra to nearby constituencies. Since constituency sizes vary, that design would likely include some constituencies that were also likely exposed to the yatra as control constituencies. Using the distance to the yatra route allows us to account for some of this.

<sup>21</sup>See India’s ruling BJP has lost its only southern stronghold. What does it mean for Modi?

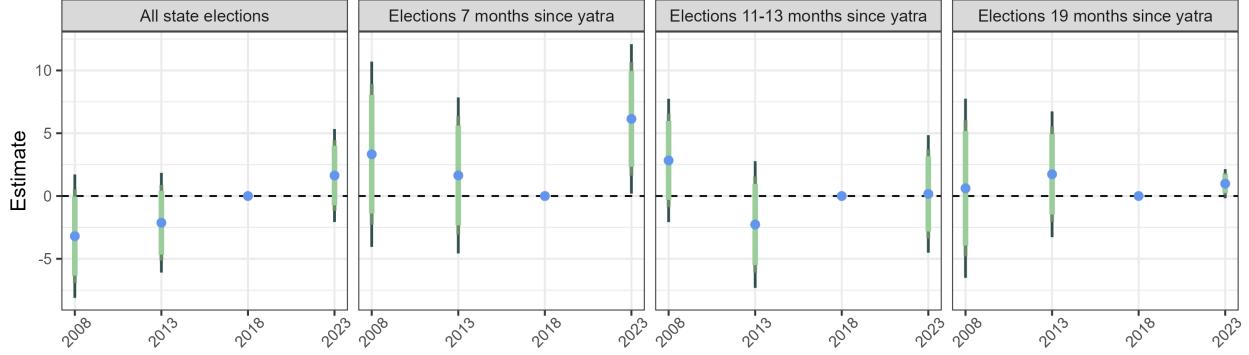


Figure 4: Effect on INC Vote Share in State Elections: Event Study

*Notes:* Standard errors clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections occurred 7 months after the yatra; Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana 11–13 months after; Andhra Pradesh 19 months after. Election years are standardized to 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024 (actual AP elections were in 2009, 2013, 2019, and 2024). 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals are shown.

## 5.2 National Elections

We examine the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share in national elections, focusing on different subsets of constituencies. Our results from the state elections reveal that when elections occur over a year after the yatra, we do not see positive effects on Congress vote share. The national elections were held 15 to 19 months after the yatra crossed a state. Because of this temporal distance, it is unlikely that we will observe significant positive impacts of the yatra on Congress vote share. However, some constituencies may still exhibit lingering effects more than a year after the yatra.

In Table 3, we show the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share in national elections. First, examining all assembly constituencies, we find a small and statistically insignificant effect of the yatra on Congress vote share. One challenge in examining Congress vote share in national elections is the variation in alliance formations over time. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party contested separately from Congress in 2019, but in 2024 they formed a joint front as part of the INDIA alliance. To account for this, in Model 2, we restrict the sample to constituencies where Congress contested in all four elections. We again find no significant effect of the yatra on INC vote share. These findings are consistent with the expectation that the yatra’s effect would diminish over time.

In 2024, the INDIA alliance between Congress and other prominent regional parties resulted in different seat-sharing agreements across states. In some states, Congress was the leading alliance party, contesting the majority of the seats. These states would be more likely to have a longer-term effect of the yatra, given Congress’s central role in national politics there. In Models 3 and 4, we focus on states where Congress was the main alliance party

against the BJP.<sup>22</sup> In these states, we find that the yatra increased Congress' vote share by 2.30 to 3.01 percentage points. The event study in Figure 5 supports the parallel trends assumption, reinforcing the credibility of the positive and statistically significant effects observed in models focused on Congress-led states.

Table 3: Effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections

|                         | DV: Congress Vote Share |                         |   |                                    |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|                         | All States              | Congress Always Contest | Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024) | Congress Strongholds States (2024) |
|                         | (1)                     | (2)                     | (3)                                     | (4)                                |
| $BJY_i \times Post_t$   | 0.29<br>(0.83)          | 0.53<br>(0.83)          | 3.01***<br>(0.98)                       | 2.30**<br>(0.94)                   |
| Observations            | 12328                   | 8608                    | 8132                                    | 7622                               |
| Year FEs                | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| AC FE <sub>s</sub>      | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| Number of Clusters (AC) | 3743                    | 2157                    | 2123                                    | 1973                               |
| Mean of DV              | 30.66                   | 34.33                   | 33.69                                   | 34.04                              |

Notes: \* $p<0.1$ ; \*\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.01$ . SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

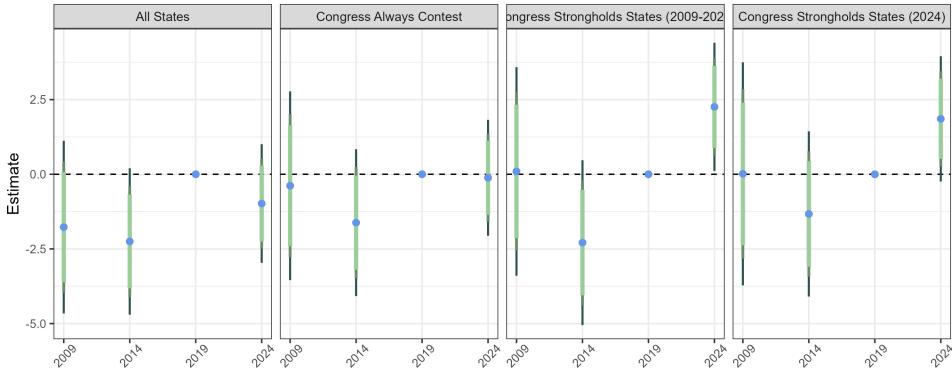


Figure 5: Event Study for 2024 National Election

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the assembly constituency level. Panel 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Panel 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Panel 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Panel 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections. 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals are shown.

In Table B.3 and Table B.4 in Appendix B.2, we present results at the parliamentary

<sup>22</sup>We use two measures for if Congress was the main alliance party against the BJP. In Model 3, we measure this by focusing on states where the INC contested in above 80% of the constituencies for all four elections. This results in the following 20 states: Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Odisha, Puducherry, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Telangana, Tripura, and Uttarakhand. In Model 4, we measure this by focusing on states where the INC contested in above 80% of the constituencies for only the 2024 elections. This results in the following 18 states: Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Puducherry, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Telangana, and Uttarakhand.

constituency level (each parliamentary constituency constitutes about 5-9 assembly constituencies). These results point in the same direction but are statistically insignificant, likely due to the coarser granularity of the treatment definition. In Appendix B.2 we further examine the impact of distance to the yatra on Congress vote share in the national election, measured using both assembly (Table B.6) and parliamentary constituency-level (Table B.5) data.<sup>23</sup> The results reveal similar patterns as we find in Table 3. The yatra has a small and often insignificant impact on Congress vote share across the national election and in places where Congress contested all four national election cycles. However, focusing on places where Congress was the key opposition alliance party, we find that as we move further from the yatra route, there is a significant decrease in INC vote share.

The results reveal that while overall the effect of the yatra dissipated by the time of the national elections, about a year and a half later, there is still an observable effect in places where Congress was the key opposition party against the BJP. The yatra platformed Congress leaders and the Congress party making its impact most likely in places where Congress, not other opposition parties, matters. This helps explain why we observe a positive effect on Congress vote share primarily in states where the INC regularly opposed the BJP on its own rather than relying heavily on alliance coalition partners. The impact of the leader-driven grassroots campaign appears limited to the party that mobilized voters, with little spillover to allied parties.

### 5.3 Detailed Study of the Karnataka State Elections

So far, the main analysis has considered an entire assembly constituency as treated by the yatra if the yatra crossed through it and the supplementary analysis looks at the distance to the yatra from the centroid of an assembly constituency. The average area of an Indian assembly constituency is approximately 900 square kilometers and the average number of voters per assembly constituency is 200,000. Given this scale, the current analysis uses an expansive definition of treatment. Therefore, we may be underestimating the effect of the yatra. To generate a precise estimate of the yatra on Congress vote share, we focus on the first state to hold an election after the yatra, Karnataka and analyze voting behavior at the most granular level available in administrative data, the polling station.

The Form 20 provides election results at the polling station level for all contesting candidates in India. On average, each polling station has approximately 900 voters. We scrape this data for the 2018 polling station-level results from the Karnataka Election Information System. The 2023 polling station-level results are only available in PDFs from the Chief

---

<sup>23</sup>In Table B.7, we show that the distance results are robust to using Conley Standard Errors to adjust for errors being correlated across units that are geographically close to each other.

Election Commissioner of Karnataka. We scrapped the PDF and OCR and then manually cleaned the data to map the candidate with their political party. We also retrieved a shapefile of polling stations in 2018 from the Karnataka Election Information System, which allows us to examine the impact of the yatra spatially. Polling station serial numbers across time are not always the same so we take two approaches to matching these. First, we exact match on polling station numbers which provides the least conservative approach since the addition of new stations could lead to some re-numbering. This is referred to as the “Number-Matched Sample” and includes data on the over 100,000 polling stations in Karnataka. Second, we do an exact match on the name of the polling station (the name of a school and room number) which provides the most conservative approach. This is referred to as the “Exact Name-Matched Sample” and includes data on the over 57,000 polling stations in Karnataka that we are able to perfectly match. We provide further details on this process in Appendix C.

With these two samples, we estimate a range of models to examine how being proximate to the yatra route impacted Congress vote share. The results are shown in Table 4. In models 1 and 4 we use a standard two-period difference-in-differences model where we define a polling station as treated if the yatra crossed through an assembly constituency in which the station is located.<sup>24</sup> We find that there is an 8.76-9.20 percentage point increase in Congress vote share in polling stations in assembly constituencies that the yatra crossed, reflecting about a 20% increase from the mean Congress vote share across both elections in Karnataka. In models 2 and 5, we again use a standard two-period difference-in-differences model; however, we defined a polling station as treated if the yatra crossed the area that the polling station covered.<sup>25</sup> In polling stations that Rahul Gandhi crossed in Karnataka, we see a 10.59-13.63 percentage point increase in Congress vote share. Finally, in models 3 and 6, we use a continuous treatment of the log distance to the yatra route to examine how moving away from the yatra route impacted Congress vote share. We find that moving further away from the yatra decreased Congress vote share in the 2024 election compared to the 2018 election. To understand the impact, if we take two polling stations, one that is 10 kilometers from the yatra route and one that is 100 kilometers away, the further away polling station would be expected to have about a 6.22 percentage point lower Congress vote share. These results reveal larger effects than our aggregate results in the previous section. This is likely the case because we have a more precise measure of exposure to the yatra so are unlikely to include areas in your “treated units” that may be in a constituency that the yatra passed through but still far away from the route. Moreover, because we focus on the

---

<sup>24</sup>The percent of treated polling stations is 8.5% in the Number-Matched Sample and 7.7% in the Exact Name-Matched Sample.

<sup>25</sup>The percent of treated polling stations is 0.082% in the Number-Matched Sample and 0.78% in the Exact Name-Matched Sample.

first state to hold elections after the yatra, this provides the most likely case to find an effect.

Table 4: Effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections

|   | DV: Congress Vote Share |                    |                    |                           |                    |                    |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|   | Number-Matched Sample   |                    |                    | Exact Name-Matched Sample |                    |                    |
|   | (1)                     | (2)                | (3)                | (4)                       | (5)                | (6)                |
| BJY(AC) <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub>          | 9.20***<br>(2.57)       |                    |                    | 8.76***<br>(2.28)         |                    |                    |
| BJY(PS) <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub>          |                         | 10.59***<br>(1.02) |                    |                           | 13.63***<br>(1.65) |                    |
| Log(Dist to BJY) <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> |                         |                    | -2.44***<br>(0.10) |                           |                    | -2.77***<br>(0.13) |
| Treatment Definition                              | Route Crosses AC        | Route Crosses PS   | Distance to Route  | Route Crosses AC          | Route Crosses PS   | Distance to Route  |
| Observations                                      | 105796                  | 105796             | 105796             | 57606                     | 57606              | 57606              |
| Year FEs  | ✓                       | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                         | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| Polling Station FEs                               | ✓                       | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                         | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| Number of Clusters (AC)                           | 224                     | 57300              | 57300              | 205                       | 34467              | 34467              |
| Mean of DV  | 41.1                    | 41.1               | 41.1               | 41.25                     | 41.25              | 41.25              |

Notes: \* $p<0.1$ ; \*\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.01$ . Columns 1–3 use data merged by polling station number; Columns 4–6 use data merged by polling station name. Treatment is defined at the assembly constituency (AC) level in Columns 1 and 4 (SEs clustered at AC level), at the polling station (PS) level in Columns 2 and 5 (clustered at PS level), and as a continuous measure (log distance to the yatra) in Columns 3 and 6 (also clustered at PS level).

The final set of analyses that examines how the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share decreases with distance assumes a linear effect of distance on vote share. This means that moving from 0 km to 1 km away is considered similar to moving from 300 km to 301 km away, which may not accurately reflect reality. To address this issue, we apply a method developed by (Butts 2023), which divides the sample into distance quantiles, as outlined by (Cattaneo et al. 2024; Cattaneo, Farrell and Feng 2020). The effect is then estimated non-parametrically within each bin by comparing units before and after treatment. The estimated effect from the most distant bin is subtracted from the others to normalize the results. This approach allows for a data-driven and optimal selection of the number and location of bins, minimizing the risk of researcher bias. Unlike the conventional ad-hoc selection of treatment and control rings, this estimator prevents the selection of rings that might unintentionally produce exaggerated or negligible effects.

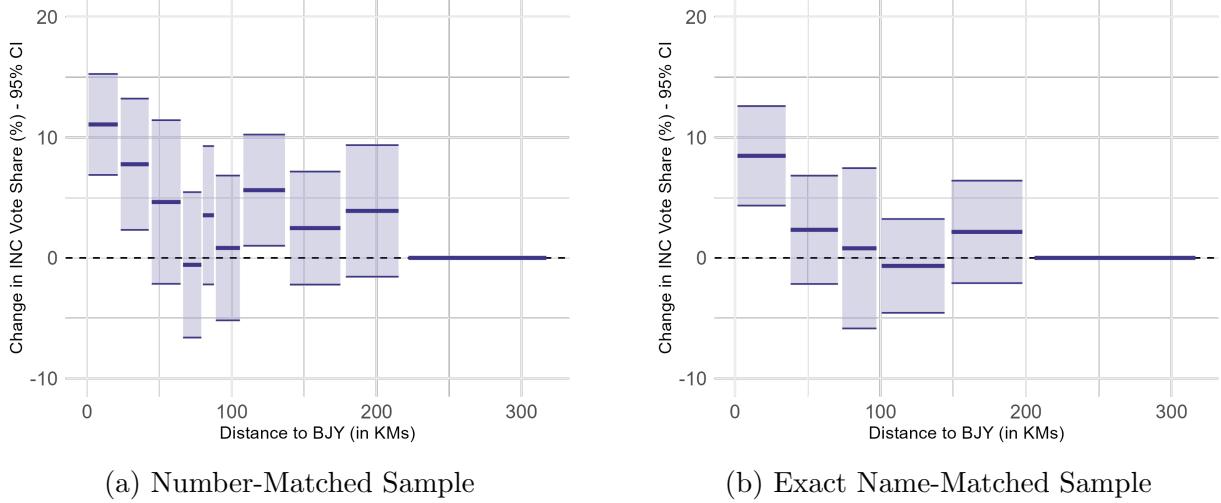


Figure 6: The effect of distance on INC vote share

The results from this analysis are visualized in Figure 6. The figure reveals that the positive effects of the yatra on INC vote share are concentrated within about 50 kilometers of the yatra. We interpret this finding as suggesting that the effect of the yatra is likely to come from some direct interaction with the march. In fact, across all of our analysis, our design assumes that there is something critical about experiencing the yatra, beyond just hearing about it more broadly. If we believe that news about the yatra reached the country overall, then each design estimates the impact of a more direct experience with the yatra.

## 6 How Exposure to Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns Can Help the Opposition

Our results demonstrate that grassroots campaigns by the Indian National Congress's leader Rahul Gandhi through the Bharat Jodo Yatra increased INC vote share in a limited way, ultimately mattering for elections that were temporally proximate, geographically close to the yatra route, and for the party organizing the yatra itself. We now turn to understanding how exposure to these campaigns can help the opposition. Our theoretical argument highlights the role of leader-driven grassroots campaigns in addressing key weaknesses that opposition parties face when competing against populist parties. To understand how this works for the INC's yatra, we present evidence from interviews with twenty Congress party leaders and workers, civil society organizations, and voters, primarily in Karnataka, seven months after the election, alongside additional quantitative analysis. We discuss the interview methodology in Appendix F. We recognize that party functionaries may describe the yatra impact in a particular way, so the interview evidence should be interpreted as perceptions

of individuals rather than conclusive evidence of yatra changes. The evidence highlights that leader-driven grassroots campaigns allow the opposition to counter the narrative of being elite, reach voters in a pro-incumbent environment, and improve perceptions of their electoral viability.

## 6.1 Countering the Elite Narrative

The yatra helped Congress address its branding as an elite party. During the rise of the BJP under Modi, the party used populist rhetoric to frame the Congress as elite relative to the BJP, which was portrayed as connected to the masses (Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021; Leidig and Mudde 2023; Naseemullah and Chhibber 2024). This is clear in Modi's emphasis on his humble origins, in contrast to the opposition's dynastic politics. Many accounts of the yatra highlighted how Gandhi's one-on-one engagement with voters, where he listened to their concerns and interacted with them on their terms, helped reshape his public image. One voter described the effort to connect: "Rahul Gandhi walked and listened to our problems."<sup>26</sup> Other voters highlighted how the idea of walking across the entire country made them see Gandhi as less elite and willing to endure hardship. One voter said it was impactful to "see a party leader walking and doing this hardship"<sup>27</sup> while another emphasized that "everyday when Rahul Gandhi walked people were thinking whether he would have the capacity to do the entire thing and he then he did."<sup>28</sup> The yatra further addressed the perception of Rahul Gandhi as an elite dynast with one Congress worker emphasizing that "the yatra showed people that [he] was not just inheriting power."<sup>29</sup> Rahul Gandhi has regularly faced criticism from the opposition for being an ineffective leader, often derided as "Pappu." In places that experienced the yatra, voters claimed that "fewer people would refer to Rahul Gandhi as Pappu" stating that they "could no longer attack him like that after he walked across the entire country to meet them."<sup>30</sup>

After the yatra, Gandhi and the party regularly invoked this grassroots connection to pitch the ideological position of the Congress party. During the yatra, Gandhi's interaction with one voter - who described Gandhi's effort as "a shop of love in a marketplace of hate" (*nafrat ke bazaar mein mohabbat ki dukaan*) was repeatedly used by the party as their ideological counterpoint to the BJP's politics. In recounting this moment in later speeches, Gandhi emphasized that this slogan originated from his direct engagement with voters at the grassroots.

---

<sup>26</sup>Author interview with voter. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

<sup>27</sup>Author interview with voter. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

<sup>28</sup>Author interview with voter. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

<sup>29</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

<sup>30</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 10, 2024. Mysore District.

## 6.2 Reaching Voters in a Pro-Incumbent Environment

The yatra provided Congress with a way to reach voters in the face of a media environment dominated by pro-incumbent bias. Modi and the BJP have been effective at communicating and controlling the narrative (Sircar 2020). The ruling government has cracked down on media that criticized it leveraging a range of tactics to promote pro-government content (Bhat 2023). Moreover, (Tudor 2023) notes that “harassment of independent journalism and concentrating ownership structures have meant that journalists and individuals practice a high degree of self-censorship.” This created an environment that would be a significant challenge for any opposition party to break through.

The yatra provided an opportunity to gain coverage and engage voters directly. Party workers highlighted that a diverse set of media covered Congress during the yatra. One member of the Congress team explained that “the alternative media started covering the yatra because the mainstream media was not covering it as well” and this “created a buzz” in which “people viewed Congress as different than before.”<sup>31</sup> The spectacle of the yatra further boosted voters’ interest, prompting many to seek out more information. One elected Congress legislator highlighted that the fact that Gandhi was walking across the country “increased curiosity among voters to learn more about why he was walking.”<sup>32</sup>

One observable implication for this mechanism would be increased political interest in topics related to the yatra, Rahul Gandhi, and Congress. We test this using data from Google Trends, which researchers use to capture average internet search patterns among defined populations over time and space (Dancy and Fariss 2024). We collect search behavior for the following topics: Bharat Jodo Yatra, Rahul Gandhi, Indian National Congress, Narendra Modi, and Bharatiya Janata Party.<sup>33</sup> Google trends measures an interest from citizens in search terms related to the yatra, rather than evidence of media coverage. Google Trends does not provide raw search totals; instead, it offers data that have already been transformed using min-max normalization from 0 to 100. The dependent variable will take a value of 100 when the maximum ratio of BJV topic searches to all Google searches is at the maximum and 0 when it is at the minimum. We collect daily data for all Indian states from September 6, 2022, to January 31, 2023, from one day before the BJV began to one day after it ended.

We examine the effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Google searches using an event study at the state-day level. This analysis tests the dynamic treatment effects of the yatra entering a state on political interest in a search topic. Given the staggered timing of the

---

<sup>31</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

<sup>32</sup>Author interview with Congress MLA. January 9, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

<sup>33</sup>These Google Trends Topics include a group of terms that share the same concept in any language. This ensures we capture the entire search pattern on the Google platform regardless of which language or similar wording is used to look for it.

yatra's entry into each state, we use the approach developed by (Callaway and Sant'Anna 2021) for staggered difference-in-differences to estimate an event study, assessing how search interest changes in the days following the yatra's entry. The results are displayed in Figure 7. When the yatra entered a state, we observe a large increase in search interest for the Bharat Jodo Yatra and Rahul Gandhi, and a smaller increase for the Indian National Congress in the days following entry. For each of these terms, interest levels return to pre-yatra baselines approximately 15–20 days later. We find no impact of the yatra on political interest in Narendra Modi or the BJP. In Tables D.1 and D.2 in Appendix D, we report the difference-in-difference estimates for each search topic and in Figures D.1, D.2, and D.3 in Appendix D we provide event studies using alternative estimate processes for staggered difference-in-differences. The results show a large, statistically significant effect on interest in the BJV and Rahul Gandhi, a smaller significant effect for the INC, and no detectable effect for Modi or the BJP. We interpret these findings as evidence that the yatra generated increased demand for information about the movement, the leader, and the party, despite the challenges traditionally faced by the opposition in a pro-incumbent media environment.

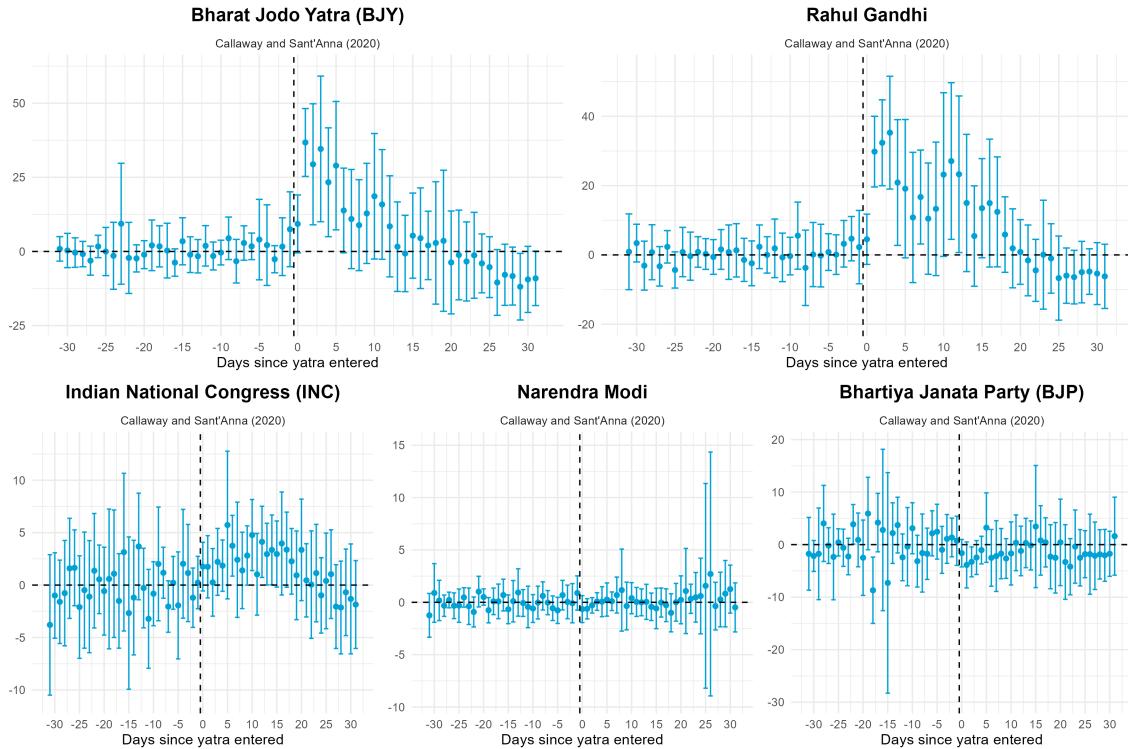


Figure 7: Impacts of BJV on Google Search Outcomes

### 6.3 Improving Perceptions of Viability

The yatra improved the perception of Congress' viability despite the tilt in the electoral playing field. While the focus on India's democratic challenges has centered on the BJP's erosion of liberal democratic credentials, there have also been difficulties in the realm of electoral democracy, including increasing deference of the Election Commission to the executive (Vaishnav 2024a), a shift from earlier norms (Sridharan and Vaishnav 2017), reduced transparency in election financing through the use of electoral bonds (Vaishnav 2024b), and legal troubles for regional opposition leaders. These can lead voters to perceive incumbent victory as inevitable and diminish opposition viability.

Interviews with voters in areas that experienced the yatra revealed how it changed the discourse around Congress, making the party appear more viable. One voter described how on a “mass level the impression of the party went up” and that “people seemed more likely to accept the Congress.”<sup>34</sup> This perception was shared by Congress party workers as well, a local Congress party worker in Mandya district, Karnataka, where the yatra passed, described how party membership increased: “after the yatra the members doubled<sup>35</sup>, especially we had many youth joining the party.”<sup>36</sup>

Improved perceptions of viability were also linked to the view that the yatra presented the Congress party as a united front against the incumbent. Across interviews, the yatra was described as an effort to unite factions within the party and project a cohesive image to voters. In Karnataka, Congress Party workers highlighted how two senior Congress leaders representing different factions within the party walked together hand-in-hand with Rahul Gandhi during the yatra. He described that “when DK [Shivakumar] and Siddaramaiah were walking together, it neutralized allegations of infighting in the Congress.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, a large poster of Rahul Gandhi walking hand in hand with DK Shivakumar and Siddaramaiah was still displayed outside the Congress office building 15 months after the yatra had left Karnataka. The yatra showed that that party was united and internal factions would not limit its viability, especially considering the history of factional politics in the Congress (Brass 1965; Kochanek 1968; Nellis 2016).

By helping to build party organization in areas where the yatra passed, it also increased Congress's visibility and viability. One member of the Congress team who supported Rahul Gandhi during the Karnataka leg described how the yatra provided the party workers an opportunity to “interact with Rahul Gandhi and get pictures with him” contributing to

---

<sup>34</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

<sup>35</sup>We were unable to verify this but it reflects a perception that party elites noticed an increase in membership

<sup>36</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

<sup>37</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

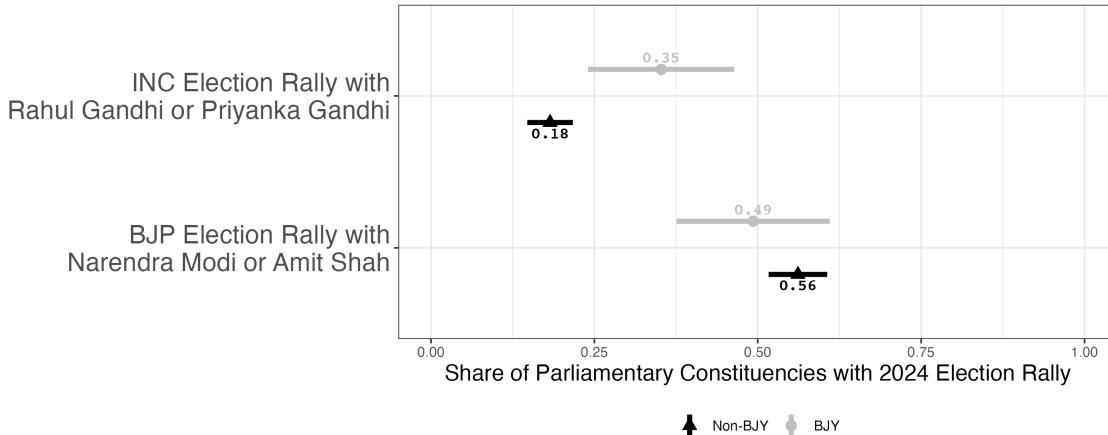


Figure 8: BJP and Congress Election Campaign Rallies in BJV and non-BJV Constituencies

“cadre-based enthusiasm” where “the workers felt like this was the moment for the party.”<sup>38</sup> This reinvigorated party organization could be expected to contribute to greater mobilization. One observable implication is an increase in rallies in yatra constituencies in the lead-up to the 2024 elections.

Using data on campaign rallies by the BJP (with Narendra Modi or Amit Shah) and by Congress (with Rahul Gandhi or Priyanka Gandhi), we examine whether yatra constituencies hosted more INC rallies.<sup>39</sup> Figure 8 shows that BJV parliamentary constituencies had nearly double the share of Congress rallies (35%) compared to non-BJV constituencies (18%) ahead of the 2024 national elections. There is no significant difference for the BJP. While it is possible that yatra constituencies were electorally strategic for Congress leading both to their selection for the yatra and the subsequent rallies, it is also plausible that the organizational capacity built during the yatra helped facilitate future mobilization.

The follow-up rallies during the 2024 elections also help explain the positive effect of the yatra on INC vote share in places where Congress was the key alliance party. Disaggregating the rallies in BJV constituencies by those in states where Congress was the key alliance party compared to those where they were not shows that rallies are more likely in the Congress stronghold states, with 42% of them experiencing a 2024 election rally.

In sum, interview evidence, Google Trends analysis, and descriptive rally data suggest that the yatra increased Congress vote share by addressing particular challenges faced by the opposition in confronting a populist incumbent. The Bharat Jodo Yatra helped counter the elite narrative, reach voters in a pro-incumbent environment, and improve perceptions of the party’s viability.

<sup>38</sup>Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

<sup>39</sup>The location of rallies was collected by a researcher in India and is described in the [Times of India](#). This data was also used by [Verma and Pratikshit \(2024\)](#).

## 7 How Participation in Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns Impact Voters

We now turn to examining the individual-level dynamics of leader-driven grassroots campaigns. While our earlier analysis focused on how exposure to the yatra impacted aggregate electoral outcomes and changes in opposition support, it did not consider individual-level participation in the yatra. We now turn to address which individuals participated in the campaign and whether this participation impacted them. To investigate these questions, we conducted an original telephone survey of 3,510 citizens. The survey was administered by CVoter, an Indian public opinion research firm, in January 2024, approximately fifteen months after the yatra passed through Karnataka and thirteen months after it passed through Madhya Pradesh. CVoter added the questions to regular omnibus surveys that use random digit dialing. CVoter provides post-stratification weights to achieve representativeness on age, gender, education, income, social group, and rurality for each state. In all of our analyses, we use these weights.

In Karnataka, we surveyed 420 respondents in 20 assembly constituencies where the yatra passed and 896 respondents across a random sample of 40 assembly constituencies where the yatra did not pass through. In Madhya Pradesh, we surveyed 965 respondents across 18 assembly constituencies where the yatra passed and 1,229 respondents across a random sample of 42 assembly constituencies where the yatra did not pass through. Appendix E includes a map of our survey coverage and demographic details of our sample. Stratifying the sample on places that the yatra did and did not cross allowed us to obtain enough respondents who could have participated directly in the yatra.

### 7.1 Participants of the Yatra

In our survey, 24% of respondents reported participating in the yatra in some way (e.g. attending an event or side meeting, walking with the march). Table 9 shows the demographic and political characteristics of yatra participants compared to non-participants. We do not observe significant differences in gender, age, income, and education between yatra participants and non-participants. This suggests that leader-driven grassroots mobilization is not confined to particular vote demographics, but rather has a broad-ranging impact. We do, however, find that rural respondents made up a greater share of yatra participants. This is likely a consequence of the yatra traveling through rural parts of the country and rural voters being more likely to attend when a rally comes to their area, a sentiment reflected in our interviews as well. In terms of social groups, yatra participants were slightly more

likely to include Scheduled Castes and Tribes; however, there are no significant differences for other social groups.

Looking at the party that voters reported supporting in 2019 which they were asked about earlier in the survey, we can understand the political reach of the yatra. As expected, Congress voters made up a larger share of yatra participants (55%) than non-participants (28%) and BJP voters make up a lower share of yatra participants (40%) than non-participants (60%). Importantly, 17% of respondents who reported voting for the BJP in 2019 also participated in the yatra, suggesting that leader-driven campaigns can extend beyond core supporters to engage potential swing voters. At the same time, among Congress supporters, 39% participated in the yatra. This engagement across both groups suggests that leader-driven grassroots campaigns can assist opposition parties in reaching both core and swing voters (Cox and McCubbins 1986; Dixit and Londregan 1996).

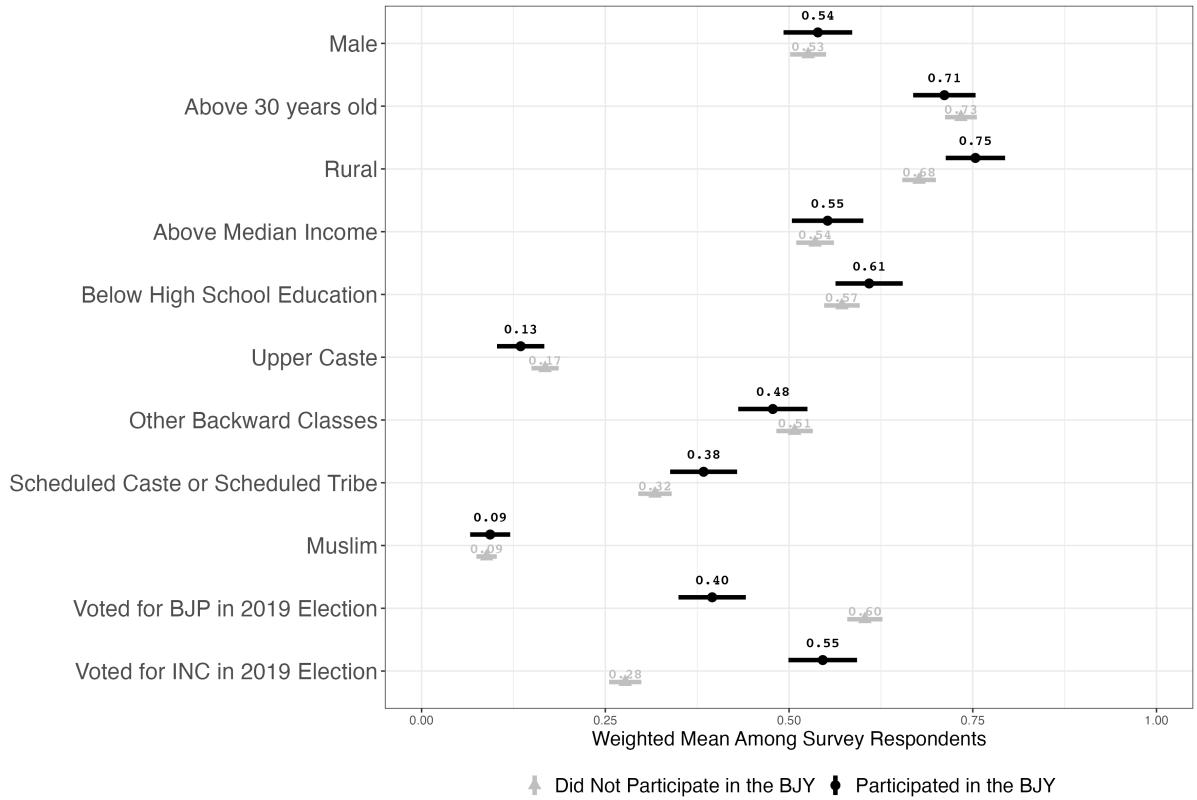


Figure 9: Demographic Characteristics of Yatra Participants

## 7.2 The Impact of Yatra Participation

We study how participation in the yatra on individual voter perceptions, political engagement, and voting behavior through a cross-sectional analysis of survey data. First, we ask

standard questions about attitudes towards Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party.<sup>40</sup> Next, we measure perceptions of party unity and engagement with both the Congress and the BJP. Engagement metrics include attending a rally, being contacted by a party worker, and engaging in discourse about the party leader, measured through conversations with neighbors or exposure to media (television or phone) Finally, we ask respondents to report their vote choice in the 2023 state elections and their current vote intention if an election were held today. More details on the survey questions are included in Appendix E.

Our analysis investigates the relationship between participation in the yatra and voter attitudes, engagement, and electoral behavior. In Figure E.4, we present the effects for each outcome variable across four samples of the survey data. First, across the full sample of all respondents, we find that participating in the yatra improved perceptions of Congress and Rahul Gandhi, increased engagement with INC, and discourse about Rahul Gandhi. We find small and insignificant effects of yatra participation on any outcomes to BJP perceptions, engagement, or discourse. In terms of voting, yatra participants are more likely to report having voted for the INC in the 2023 state elections, less likely to report having voted for the BJP in both elections, and more likely to vote for the Congress today. We find consistent patterns among subgroups: respondents who voted for the BJP in 2019 and those who voted for Congress in 2019. Among INC voters, the effect sizes are positive but smaller in magnitude, likely because these voters already held favorable views of the party and were predisposed to support it.

To further isolate the relationship between direct participation and longer-term impacts, we restrict the sample to only those respondents in assembly constituencies through which the yatra passed and compare participants with non-participants. The effects remain strong and statistically significant, suggesting that participation itself, rather than merely being in a yatra-visited area, drives changes in political attitudes and behavior. This is consistent with earlier findings from polling station-level data, where more granular definitions of “treatment” yielded stronger effects than broader constituency-level classifications.

In Appendix E we show that results hold when examining Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh separately (Figure E.2 and Figure E.3) and when using models with a range of demographic controls (Figure E.4). Together, the descriptive results suggest that participation in the yatra is not demographically constrained. Moreover, the results suggest that participation in the Bharat Jodo Yatra had lasting impacts on voter perceptions, engagement, and vote choice, highlighting the crucial role of direct connections with leader-driven campaigns.

---

<sup>40</sup>These questions are similar to other questions that CVoter has fielded in their Omnibus survey in the past.

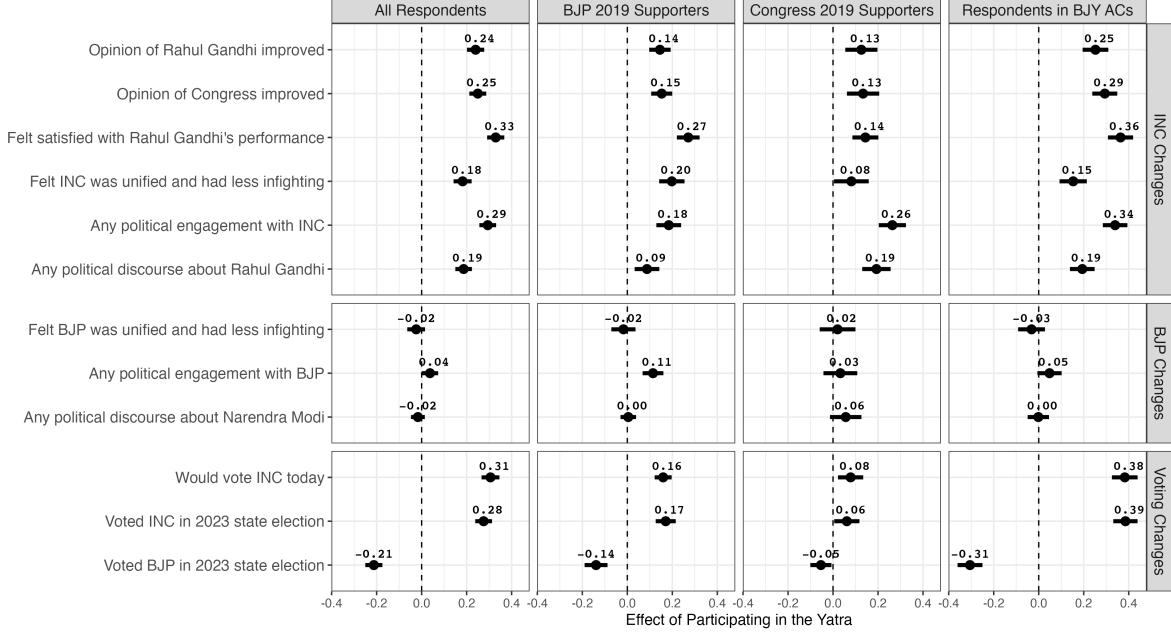


Figure 10: Relationship between Participating in the Yatra and Political Outcomes

## 8 Conclusion

The most decisive way to defeat a populist incumbent is at the ballot box. However, opposition political parties face an uphill battle in doing so. Populists frame the opposition as out of touch with voters, shape the environment to make it difficult for the opposition to break through to voters, and influence the electoral space to present the opposition as nonviable given the populist’s dominance. In the face of these challenges, we argue that the opposition can adopt leader-driven grassroots campaigns to take on the populist at the ballot box.

Opposition parties across contexts have taken this strategy in response to populists, especially those engaging in democratic erosion. In 2017, in Turkey, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu led the Justice March against backsliding by the Erdoğan regime. In 2020, in Tanzania, Freeman Mbewe led a walking rally for the Chадема party against the ruling CCM party. In 2025, in Hungary, Peter Magayar led the One Million Steps for Peace and National Unity march in response to democratic backsliding by Orban. And while political commentators often suggest that these efforts could have an impact on the opposition’s prospects, a full examination of this form of party-voter interaction is lacking.

We examine the impact of these leader-driven grassroots campaigns by focusing on Congress Party Leader Rahul Gandhi’s Bharat Jodo Yatra. Using a difference-in-differences design to study state and national elections, we find that the yatra increased Congress vote

share, but these effects were limited in several key ways. The effects are concentrated in elections temporally proximate to the yatra, in places spatially nearby to the yatra route, and for the party that was at the center of the yatra. Interviews and additional descriptive analysis reveal that the campaign countered the narrative of Congress as an elite party, allowed the opposition to break through in a pro-incumbent environment, and improved perceptions of the party's viability. Individual-level survey evidence reveals that participating in the yatra led to impacts on perceptions and engagement with the opposition one year later, highlighting that interacting with the leader-driven grassroots campaign was crucial to its impact.

The findings should also be interpreted in the context of the Congress Party's electoral performance in the 2024 general elections. The election marked the first time in 10 years that the ruling BJP did not win an outright majority without its alliance partners. The Congress party performed better than expected for a range of reasons, such as their ability to form a wide-ranging alliance with regional parties, their new ideological pitch with a bend toward justice and democratic legitimacy, their management of the internal party organization and caste-based distribution of nominations, and their effective populist appeals to the middle class (Verma and Pratikshit 2024; Chhibber 2024; Aiyar and Sircar 2025; Verniers 2025). These advantages apply to the Congress' approach to the overall election. This paper demonstrates that the Bharat Jodo Yatra also played a unique role in improving Congress' electoral performance in the general elections in states where Congress was the key party in the INDIA alliance.

Zooming out from India, the findings suggest that leader-driven campaigns can help the opposition in challenging a populist incumbent electorally. However, these campaigns are not a panacea. Their effectiveness is both geographically and temporally constrained, and they are less impactful in areas where the campaigning party is not the primary face of the opposition. Importantly, increasing the frequency or expanding the reach of such campaigns does not necessarily enhance their effectiveness. Instead, their influence may lie partly in their atypicality and the spectacle they create for the opposition. Still, these campaigns have a lasting influence on voters who engage directly with them. As opposition parties use leader-driven grassroots campaigns, they can improve the impact by mobilizing voters to participate in them.

While we focus on the use of leader-driven grassroots campaigns by the opposition against a populist, the strategy is not limited to this context. Leader-driven grassroots campaigns can help with general party building, as was the case with Lula da Silva's Caravana da Cidadania in the 1990s. However, because these campaigns address the major challenges that oppositions face when contesting against an effective populist, these contexts may be the

most likely to see the strategy. Moreover, the opposition may be best positioned to conduct this type of mobilization because they are not in office and therefore do not have to govern. This allows them to focus their attention on an atypical form of party-voter mobilization that may take up their time and energy. Finally, leader-driven grassroots campaigns are one of many strategies available to opposition parties. While this paper does not examine why the opposition pursues this strategy in some contexts and not others, it does open the need to examine how this strategy fits in a broader toolbox of electoral approaches that the opposition can take against (backslicing) populists, such as civil society collaborations (Allie and Mahajan 2025; Yabancı 2024) and citizens' assemblies (Česnulaitytė 2024).

## References

- Agarwal, A, N Agrawal, S Bhogale, S Hangal, FR Jensenius, M Kumar, C Narayan, BU Nissa, P Trivedi and G Verniers. 2022. “Trivedi, TCPD Indian Elections Data v2. 0.” *Trivedi Centre for Political Data* .
- Aiyar, Yamini and Neelanjan Sircar. 2025. “Crossing Red Lines? The BJP and Democratic Legitimacy in the 2024 Election.” *Indian Politics Policy* 5(1).
- Allie, Feyaad. 2025. “India’s New Minority Politics.” *Journal of Democracy* 36(2):78–91.
- Allie, Feyaad and Pratik Mahajan. 2025. “How Discretion Shapes Civil Society–Opposition Party Alliances Against Democratic Backsliding.” *Working Paper* .
- Arriola, Leonardo R, Donghyun Danny Choi, Matthew K Gichohi and Ken Ochieng’Opalo. 2024. “Do Voters Respond to Cross-Cleavage Campaigning in Polarized Societies?”.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. “On democratic backsliding.” *Journal of democracy* 27(1):5–19.
- Bhat, Prashanth. 2023. “Hindu-Nationalism and media: anti-press sentiments by right-wing media in India.” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 25(4):296–364.
- Bhavnani, Rikhil R and Saumitra Jha. 2014. “Gandhi’s gift: Lessons for peaceful reform from india’s struggle for democracy.”.
- Blakeslee, David. 2018. “The Rath Yatra effect: Hindu nationalist propaganda and the rise of the bjp.” *June. NYU Working Paper* .
- Bonikowski, Bart. 2019. Trump’s Populism. In *When Democracy Trumps Populism*, ed. Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 110–131.
- Bourne, Angela. 2023. “Initiatives opposing populist parties in Europe: types, methods, and patterns.” *Comparative European Politics* 21(6):742–760.
- Brass, Paul R. 1965. *Factional politics in an Indian state: the Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh*. Univ of California Press.
- Brierley, Sarah and Eric Kramon. 2020. “Party campaign strategies in Ghana: Rallies, canvassing and handouts.” *African Affairs* 119(477):587–603.
- Butts, Kyle. 2023. “JUE Insight: Difference-in-differences with geocoded microdata.” *Journal of Urban Economics* 133:103493. Special Issue: JUE Insight Shorter Papers.  
**URL:** <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0094119022000705>

- Callaway, Brantly and Pedro HC Sant'Anna. 2021. "Difference-in-differences with multiple time periods." *Journal of econometrics* 225(2):200–230.
- Carrión, Julio F. 2022. *A dynamic theory of populism in power: The Andes in comparative perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- Cattaneo, Matias D, Max H Farrell and Yingjie Feng. 2020. "Large sample properties of partitioning-based series estimators." *The Annals of Statistics* 48(3):1718–1741.
- Cattaneo, Matias D, Richard K Crump, Max H Farrell and Yingjie Feng. 2024. "On bin-scatter." *American Economic Review* 114(5):1488–1514.
- Česnulaitytė, Ieva. 2024. "Citizens' Assemblies: Democratic Responses to Authoritarian Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe." .
- Chacko, Priya. 2018. "The right turn in India: Authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48(4):541–565.
- Chhibber, Pradeep. 2024. "Middle-class Populism: Political Inequalities and Populist Appeal in India." *Studies in Indian Politics* 12(2):208–227.
- Chhibber, Pradeep K. 2001. *Democracy without associations: transformation of the party system and social cleavages in India*. University of Michigan Press.
- Chhibber, Pradeep K and Rahul Verma. 2018. *Ideology and identity: The changing party systems of India*. Oxford University Press.
- Choudhary, Utkarsh and Sumit Mishra. 2024. "Political Mobilization and Election Outcomes: Evidence from Bharat Jodo Yatra." .
- Cleary, Matthew R and Aykut Öztürk. 2022. "When does backsliding lead to breakdown? Uncertainty and opposition strategies in democracies at risk." *Perspectives on Politics* 20(1):205–221.
- Cox, Gary W and Mathew D McCubbins. 1986. "Electoral politics as a redistributive game." *The Journal of Politics* 48(2):370–389.
- Dancy, Geoff and Christopher J Fariss. 2024. "The global resonance of human rights: What Google trends can tell us." *American Political Science Review* 118(1):252–273.
- Dasgupta, Aditya. 2018. "Technological change and political turnover: The democratizing effects of the green revolution in india." *American Political Science Review* 112(4):918–938.

- Dixit, Avinash and John Londregan. 1996. “The determinants of success of special interests in redistributive politics.” *the Journal of Politics* 58(4):1132–1155.
- Esen, Berk and Sebnem Gumuscu. 2023. “How Erdoğan’s populism won again.” *Journal of Democracy* 34(3):21–32.
- Ferree, Karen E. 2010. *Framing the race in South Africa: The political origins of racial census elections*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gamboa, Laura. 2023. “How Oppositions Fight Back.” *Journal of Democracy* 34(3):90–104.
- Gamboa, Laura, Benjamín García-Holgado and Ezequiel González-Ocantos. 2024. “Courts against backsliding: Lessons from Latin America.” *Law & Policy* 46(4):358–379.
- Gardner, John. 2022. “Two-stage differences in differences.” *arXiv preprint arXiv:2207.05943*
- Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty. 2022. “Brahmin left versus merchant right: Changing political cleavages in 21 western democracies, 1948–2020.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 137(1):1–48.
- Goyal, Tanushree. 2024. “Representation from below: How women’s grassroots party activism promotes equal political participation.” *American Political Science Review* 118(3):1415–1430.
- Grillo, Edoardo and Carlo Prato. 2023. “Reference points and democratic backsliding.” *American Journal of Political Science* 67(1):71–88.
- Grillo, Edoardo, Zhaotian Luo, Monika Nalepa and Carlo Prato. 2024. “Theories of democratic backsliding.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 27.
- Grzymala-Busse, Anna. 2019. “How populists rule: The consequences for democratic governance.” *Polity* 51(4):707–717.
- Handlin, Samuel. 2017. *State crisis in fragile democracies: Polarization and political regimes in South America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hasan, Zoya. 2012. “Congress after Indira: Policy, power, political change (1984-2009).”
- Hasan, Zoya. 2022. *Ideology and Organization in Indian Politics: Polarization and the Growing Crisis of the Congress Party (2009-19)*. Oxford University Press.

- Horowitz, Jeremy. 2016. “The ethnic logic of campaign strategy in diverse societies: Theory and evidence from Kenya.” *Comparative Political Studies* 49(3):324–356.
- Hunter, Wendy and Timothy J Power. 2019. “Bolsonaro and Brazil’s illiberal backlash.” *Journal of Democracy* 30(1):68–82.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi’s India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe and Gilles Verniers. 2020. “A new party system or a new political system?”.  
Jaffrelot, Christophe and Sanjay Kumar. 2012. *Rise of the plebeians?: The changing face of the Indian legislative assemblies*. Routledge.
- Kalra, Aarushi. 2021. A’Ghetto’of One’s Own: Communal Violence, Residential Segregation and Group Education Outcomes in India. Technical report Center for Open Science.
- Keck, Margaret E. 1986. “Democratization and dissension: the formation of the Workers’ Party.” *Politics & Society* 15(1):67–95.
- Kochanek, Stanley A. 1968. *The Congress Party of India: the dynamics of a one-party democracy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kothari, Rajni. 1964. “The Congress’ System’in India.” *Asian survey* pp. 1161–1173.
- Krastev, Ivan. 2007. “Is East-Central Europe backsliding? The strange death of the liberal consensus.” *Journal of Democracy* 18(4):56–64.
- Kumar, Rajesh. 2024. The Congress Party and the Indian Party System. In *Indian Politics and Political Processes*. Routledge India pp. 237–258.
- Kwayu, Aikande C. 2023. “Walking rallies: Opposition party’s new campaigning approach in Tanzania’s 2020 election.” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 61(3):255–272.
- Leidig, Eviane and Cas Mudde. 2023. “Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) The overlooked populist radical right party.” *Journal of Language and Politics* 22(3):360–377.
- Levitsky, Steven. 1998. “Institutionalization and Peronism: the concept, the case and the case for unpacking the concept.” *Party politics* 4(1):77–92.
- Levitsky, Steven. 2003. *Transforming labor-based parties in Latin America: Argentine Peronism in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. How democracies die. In *Ideals and Ideologies*. Routledge.
- Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A Way. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mainwaring, Scott. 1999. *Rethinking party systems in the third wave of democratization: the case of Brazil*. Stanford University Press.
- Mainwaring, Scott and Mariano Torcal. 2006. “Party system institutionalization and party system theory after the third wave of democratization.” *Handbook of party politics* 11(6):204–227.
- Mainwaring, Scott and Timothy Scully. 1995. *Building democratic institutions: Party systems in Latin America*. Stanford University Press Stanford.
- McCoy, Jennifer and Murat Somer. 2021. “Overcoming polarization.” *Journal of Democracy* 32(1):6–21.
- Mudde, Cas. 2004. “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39(4):541–563.
- Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The far right today*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Naseemullah, Adnan and Pradeep Chhibber. 2024. *Righteous demagogues: Populist politics in South Asia and beyond*. Oxford University Press.
- Nellis, Gareth. 2016. “The fight within: Intra-party factionalism and incumbency spillovers in India.” *Unpublished manuscript, Yale University, New Haven, CT* 168:169.
- Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, Elvin. 2022. *Opposing power: building opposition alliances in electoral autocracies*. University of Michigan Press.
- Paget, Dan. 2019. “The rally-intensive campaign: A distinct form of electioneering in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24(4):444–464.
- Pons, Vincent. 2018. “Will a five-minute discussion change your mind? A countrywide experiment on voter choice in France.” *American Economic Review* 108(6):1322–1363.
- Posner, Daniel N. 2005. *Institutions and ethnic politics in Africa*. Cambridge University Press.

- Riedl, Rachel Beatty, Paul Friesen, Jennifer McCoy and Kenneth Roberts. 2024. “Democratic backsliding, resilience, and resistance.” *World Politics* .
- Samet, Oren. 2024. “When you come at the king: Opposition coalitions and nearly stunning elections.” *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Selb, Peter and Simon Munzert. 2018. “Examining a most likely case for strong campaign effects: Hitler’s speeches and the rise of the Nazi party, 1927–1933.” *American Political Science Review* 112(4):1050–1066.
- Sheikh, Shahana. 2024. “Crowds as Content: Party Campaign Strategy in the Digital Age.” *Working Paper* .
- Sircar, Neelanjan. 2020. “The politics of vishwas: Political mobilization in the 2019 national election.” *Contemporary South Asia* 28(2):178–194.
- Snyder, James M and Hasin Yousaf. 2020. Making rallies great again: The effects of presidential campaign rallies on voter behavior, 2008–2016. Technical report National bureau of economic research.
- Sridharan, Eswaran and Milan Vaishnav. 2017. “Election commission of India.” *Rethinking public institutions in India* pp. 417–463.
- Subramanian, Narendra. 2007. “Populism in India.” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27(1):81–91.
- Sun, Liyang and Sarah Abraham. 2021. “Estimating dynamic treatment effects in event studies with heterogeneous treatment effects.” *Journal of econometrics* 225(2):175–199.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2020. “When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents.” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 15(1):3–31.
- URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/100.00018132>
- Thachil, Tariq. 2014. *Elite parties, poor voters*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tudor, Maya. 2023. “Why India’s Democracy Is Dying.” *Journal of Democracy* 34(3):121–132.
- Tudor, Maya and Adam Ziegfeld. 2019. “Social cleavages, party organization, and the end of single-party dominance: Insights from India.” *Comparative Politics* 52(1):149–188.

- Vaishnav, Milan. 2024a. “Legislative capture in India: Is democracy back from the brink?” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 712(1):61–76.
- Vaishnav, Milan. 2024b. “Political Finance in India.” *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Politics* p. 349.
- Vaishnav, Milan and Jamie Hintson. 2019. *The Dawn of India’s Fourth Party System*. Vol. 5 JSTOR.
- Varshney, Ashutosh. 2022. “How India’s Ruling Party Erodes Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 33(4):104–118.
- Varshney, Ashutosh, Srikrishna Ayyangar and Siddharth Swaminathan. 2021. “Populism and Hindu nationalism in India.” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56(2):197–222.
- Verma, Rahul and Pawas Pratikshit. 2024. “Does Congress Party’s Performance in 2024 General Elections Signal Its Revival?” *Economic and political weekly* pp. 103–111.
- Verniers, Gilles. 2025. “Caste, Social Justice, and the Politics of Inclusion in the 2024 Indian General Election.” *Indian Politics Policy* 5(1).
- Wantchekon, Leonard and Jenny Guardado. 2024. “Deliberation and Ethical Voting Behavior: Evidence from a Campaign Experiment in Benin.” *American Political Science Review* 118(3):1261–1277.
- Weiner, Myron. 1967. *Party building in a new nation: The Indian National Congress*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Weyland, Kurt. 2024. *Democracy’s Resilience to Populism’s Threat: Countering Global Alarmism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Weyland, Kurt. 2025. “Opposition to populist backsliding: conditions, limitations, and opportunities.” *Democratization* 32(1):1–26.
- Wilkinson, Steven. 2007. “Explaining changing patterns of party-voter linkages in India.” *Patrons, clients, and policies: Patterns of democratic accountability and political competition* pp. 110–140.
- Yabancı, Bilge. 2024. “Civic Opposition and Democratic Backsliding: Mobilization Dynamics and Rapport with Political Parties.” *Government and Opposition* pp. 1–25.

Yadav, Yogendra. 1999. "Electoral politics in the time of change: India's third electoral system, 1989-99." *Economic and political weekly* pp. 2393–2399.

Ziegfeld, Adam. 2016. *Why regional parties?* Cambridge University Press.

# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>A Descriptive Details of Yatra and non-Yatra ACs</b>              | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>B Robustness and Additional Results</b>                           | <b>5</b>  |
| B.1 State Elections . . . . .  | 5         |
| B.2 National Elections . . . . .                                     | 6         |
| B.3 Robustness of Distance Analysis for State and National . . . . . | 6         |
| <b>C Karnataka Polling Station Data</b>                              | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>D Google Trends</b>   | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>E Phone Survey</b>  | <b>12</b> |
| E.1 Survey Methodology and Details . . . . .                         | 12        |
| E.2 Survey Robustness . . . . .                                      | 14        |
| <b>F Description of Interview Approach</b>                           | <b>16</b> |

## A Descriptive Details of Yatra and non-Yatra ACs

Table A.1 shows the differences between treated (BJY) and control constituencies on a range of outcomes related to the state election that happened before the yatra (the 2018 election for Karnataka, Telangana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh and the 2019 election in Andhra Pradesh). Table A.2 shows the differences between treated (BJY) and control constituencies on a range of outcomes related to the 2019 national elections. These balance tables highlight that the yatra was more likely to occur in places where Congress had some footing in the prior election.

Table A.1: Balance Table: Treated and Control Constituencies in 2018 State Elections

| Variable                      | BJY - Treated | Control | Difference | p-Value |
|-------------------------------|---------------|---------|------------|---------|
| Number of Candidates          | 13.333        | 13.431  | -0.10      | 0.88    |
| Number of Female Candidates   | 1.149         | 1.055   | 0.10       | 0.48    |
| Share of INC Contesting       | 0.931         | 0.973   | -0.04      | 0.13    |
| Share of INC Winning          | 0.322         | 0.330   | -0.01      | 0.87    |
| INC Vote Share                | 35.286        | 31.585  | 3.70       | 0.05    |
| Share of BJP Contesting       | 1.000         | 0.997   | 0.00       | 0.08    |
| Share of BJP Winning          | 0.299         | 0.303   | -0.00      | 0.93    |
| BJP Vote Share                | 29.691        | 27.655  | 2.04       | 0.34    |
| Turnout                       | 74.70         | 76.64   | -1.94      | 0.10    |
| Share Reserved for SC/ST      | 0.276         | 0.273   | 0.00       | 0.96    |
| Effective Number of Parties   | 2.578         | 2.690   | -0.11      | 0.04    |
| Distance to BJJ route (in KM) | 8.115         | 196.937 | -188.82    | 0.00    |

*Note:* Assembly Elections in the state of Karnataka, Telangana, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh took place in 2018 while in 2019 in Andhra Pradesh. P-values are from Welch two-sample t-tests.

Table A.2: Balance Table: Treated and Control Constituencies in 2019 General Elections

| Variable                      | BJY - Treated | Control | Difference | p-value | Level |
|-------------------------------|---------------|---------|------------|---------|-------|
| Share of INC Winning          | 0.307         | 0.138   | 0.17       | 0.00    | AC    |
| INC Vote Share                | 35.315        | 26.680  | 8.63       | 0.00    | AC    |
| Share of BJP Winning          | 0.448         | 0.514   | -0.07      | 0.06    | AC    |
| BJP Vote Share                | 42.657        | 45.507  | -2.85      | 0.07    | AC    |
| Effective Number of Parties   | 2.446         | 2.375   | 0.07       | 0.03    | AC    |
| Distance to BJY route (in KM) | 6.552         | 558.846 | -552.29    | 0.00    | AC    |
| Number of Candidates          | 17.224        | 15.337  | 1.89       | 0.00    | PC    |
| Number of Female Candidates   | 1.349         | 1.363   | -0.01      | 0.69    | PC    |
| Share of INC Contesting       | 0.804         | 0.729   | 0.08       | 0.00    | PC    |
| Share of BJP Contesting       | 0.800         | 0.797   | 0.00       | 0.77    | PC    |
| Turnout                       | 67.149        | 65.669  | 1.48       | 0.00    | PC    |
| Share Reserved for SC/ST      | 0.223         | 0.225   | -0.00      | 0.80    | PC    |
| Distance to BJY route (in KM) | 26.557        | 485.101 | -458.54    | 0.00    | PC    |

*Note:* Some variables are only available at either the Assembly Constituency (AC) or Parliamentary Constituency (PC) level. The “Level” column indicates the level at which each variable is measured.

## B Robustness and Additional Results

### B.1 State Elections

In this section, we present a series of robustness and additional results related to the state election analysis. Table B.1 shows the effect of distance to the yatra on INC vote share in state elections. Table B.2 shows the effect of the yatra on Congress win in state elections.

Table B.1: Effect of Distance to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in State Elections

|   | DV: Congress Vote Share |                                |                                    |                                 |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|   | all state elections     | elections 7 months since yatra | elections 11-13 months since yatra | elections 19 months since yatra |
|   | (1)                     | (2)                            | (3)                                | (4)                             |
| Log(Dist to BJY) <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> | -1.65***<br>(0.29)      | -1.20**<br>(0.59)              | 0.26<br>(0.32)                     | 0.37<br>(0.32)                  |
| Observations                                      | 3747                    | 891                            | 2160                               | 696                             |
| Year FEs  | ✓                       | ✓                              | ✓                                  | ✓                               |
| PC/AC FEs   | ✓                       | ✓                              | ✓                                  | ✓                               |
| Number of Clusters (AC)                           | 948                     | 224                            | 549                                | 175                             |
| Mean of DV  | 32.29                   | 38.38                          | 36.57                              | 11.24                           |

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

Table B.2: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Win in State Elections

|                                      | DV: Congress Win    |                                |                                    |                                 |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                      | all state elections | elections 7 months since yatra | elections 11-13 months since yatra | elections 19 months since yatra |
|                                      | (1)                 | (2)                            | (3)                                | (4)                             |
| BJY <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> | 0.12**<br>(0.06)    | 0.18*<br>(0.10)                | 0.07<br>(0.07)                     | 0.001<br>(0.07)                 |
| Observations                         | 3784                | 893                            | 2195                               | 696                             |
| Year FEs                             | ✓                   | ✓                              | ✓                                  | ✓                               |
| AC FEs                               | ✓                   | ✓                              | ✓                                  | ✓                               |
| Number of Clusters (AC)              | 948                 | 224                            | 549                                | 175                             |
| Mean of DV                           | 0.34                | 0.47                           | 0.34                               | 0.15                            |

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

## B.2 National Elections

In this section, we present a series of robustness and additional results related to the national election analysis. Table B.3 shows the effect of the yatra on INC vote share in the national elections, measured at the PC-level. Table B.5 shows the effect of distance to the yatra on INC vote share in national elections measured at the PC-level while Table B.6 does so at the AC-level. Table B.4 shows the effect of the yatra on Congress win in national elections, measured at the PC-level.

Table B.3: Effect of Yatra on INC Vote Share in National Elections (PC-Level)

|                         | DV: Congress Vote Share |                         |   |                                    |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|                         | All States              | Congress Always Contest | Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024) | Congress Strongholds States (2024) |
|                         | (1)                     | (2)                     | (3)                                     | (4)                                |
| $BJY_i \times Post_t$   | -0.55<br>(1.38)         | -0.05<br>(1.34)         | 2.46<br>(1.61)                          | 1.53<br>(1.52)                     |
| Observations            | 1598                    | 1084                    | 925                                     | 900                                |
| Year FEes               | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| PC FEes                 | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| Number of Clusters (PC) | 501                     | 271                     | 239                                     | 232                                |
| Mean of DV              | 28.93                   | 33.81                   | 32.99                                   | 33.15                              |

Notes: \* $p<0.1$ ; \*\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.01$ . SEs clustered at the parliamentary constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

Table B.4: Effect of Yatra on INC Win in National Elections (PC-Level)

|                         | DV: Congress WIN |                         |   |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|                         | All States       | Congress Always Contest | Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024) | Congress Strongholds States (2024) |
|                         | (1)              | (2)                     | (3)                                     | (4)                                |
| $BJY_i \times Post_t$   | 0.02<br>(0.03)   | -0.01<br>(0.04)         | 0.01<br>(0.04)                          | 0.001<br>(0.04)                    |
| Observations            | 4183             | 2162                    | 1904                                    | 1848                               |
| Year FEes               | ✓                | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| PC FEes                 | ✓                | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| Number of Clusters (PC) | 529              | 271                     | 239                                     | 232                                |
| Mean of DV              | 0.09             | 0.15                    | 0.11                                    | 0.12                               |

Notes: \* $p<0.1$ ; \*\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p<0.01$ . SEs clustered at the parliamentary constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

## B.3 Robustness of Distance Analysis for State and National

In Table B.7, we show the p-values for our main specifications from Table 2 and 3 in the main text using Conley Standard Errors with different distance cut offs to adjust for

Table B.5: Effect of Distance to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections (PC-Level)

|   | DV: Congress Vote Share |                         |   |                                    |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|   | All States              | Congress Always Contest | Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024) | Congress Strongholds States (2024) |
|   | (1)                     | (2)                     | (3)                                     | (4)                                |
| Log(Dist to BJV) <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> | -0.09<br>(0.53)         | 0.03<br>(0.55)          | -1.31**<br>(0.62)                       | -0.77<br>(0.62)                    |
| Observations                                      | 1598                    | 1084                    | 925                                     | 900                                |
| Year FEes   | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| AC FEes   | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| Number of Clusters (PC)                           | 501                     | 271                     | 239                                     | 232                                |
| Mean of DV  | 28.93                   | 33.81                   | 32.99                                   | 33.15                              |

Notes: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. SEs clustered at the parliamentary constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

Table B.6: Effect Distance to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections (AC-Level)

|   | DV: Congress Vote Share |                         |   |                                    |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|   | All States              | Congress Always Contest | Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024) | Congress Strongholds States (2024) |
|   | (1)                     | (2)                     | (3)                                     | (4)                                |
| Log(Dist to BJV) <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> | -0.85***<br>(0.20)      | -0.66***<br>(0.20)      | -1.94***<br>(0.23)                      | -1.30***<br>(0.23)                 |
| Observations                                      | 12328                   | 8608                    | 8132                                    | 7622                               |
| Year FEes   | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| PC/AC FEes  | ✓                       | ✓                       | ✓                                       | ✓                                  |
| Number of Clusters (AC)                           | 3743                    | 2157                    | 2123                                    | 1973                               |
| Mean of DV  | 30.66                   | 34.33                   | 33.69                                   | 34.04                              |

Notes: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

spatial correlation, where errors are correlated across units that are geographically close to each other. Our effects are robust to this test across distance cutoffs.

Table B.7: P-values Different Cutoff Distances (Conley Standard Errors)

| Distance Cutoff in KMs | P-Value  |               |                          |             |             |                    |             |                   |
|------------------------|----------|---------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|
|                        | All (VS) | Karnataka(VS) | Telangana, MP, Raj. (VS) | Andhra (VS) | All (LS-AC) | LS Strongholds(AC) | All (LS-PC) | LS-PC Strongholds |
| (1)                    | (2)      | (3)           | (4)                      | (5)         | (6)         | (7)                | (8)         |                   |
| 5                      | 0        | 0.0402        | 0.4178                   | 0.2533      | 0.0015      | 0                  | 0.8626      | 0.0368            |
| 10                     | 0        | 0.0319        | 0.4913                   | 0.2567      | 0.0195      | 0                  | 0.8640      | 0.0407            |
| 25                     | 0.0010   | 0.0275        | 0.5752                   | 0.3141      | 0.1442      | 0.0049             | 0.8773      | 0.0770            |
| 30                     | 0.0020   | 0.0085        | 0.5920                   | 0.3625      | 0.1693      | 0.0077             | 0.8819      | 0.0841            |
| 40                     | 0.0046   | 0.0176        | 0.6179                   | 0.4027      | 0.2130      | 0.0138             | 0.8894      | 0.0873            |
| 50                     | 0.0091   | 0.0158        | 0.6313                   | 0.4209      | 0.2491      | 0.0218             | 0.8947      | 0.0998            |
| 75                     | 0.0229   | 0.0345        | 0.6427                   | 0.3513      | 0.3188      | 0.0456             | 0.9068      | 0.1527            |
| 100                    | 0.0323   | 0.0211        | 0.6350                   | 0.1810      | 0.3653      | 0.0627             | 0.9168      | 0.1852            |

## C Karnataka Polling Station Data

We provide full details on the scraping and processing of our Karnataka polling station data. Form 20 provides election results at the polling station level for all contesting candidates in India. On average, each polling station has approximately 900 voters. There were 56,994 polling stations in the 2018 Karnataka assembly election. We scrape the data for the 2018 polling station-level results from the Karnataka Election Information System.<sup>41</sup> The website gives polling station-level votes for each candidate. We then manually mapped candidates to their political party using the state election data from TCPD. Due to some missingness, we have 54,433 polling stations in our data out of 56,994 in 2018. The data for the 2023 assembly election for the state of Karnataka is only available in PDF format on the website of the Chief Election Commissioner of Karnataka<sup>42</sup>. We scrapped the PDF and OCR and then manually cleaned the data to map the candidate with their political party.<sup>43</sup> In our data, we have 47,898 out of 58,282 polling stations in 2023.

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

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

---

<sup>41</sup>Karnataka Election Information, last accessed on 6th Aug 2024

<sup>42</sup>Karnataka CEO, last accessed on 6th Aug 2024

<sup>43</sup>Note that many of these websites are only accessible in India or with a VPN.

## D Google Trends

Table D.1 shows the difference-in-difference effect of the yatra entering a state on daily Google trends searches.

Table D.1: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Daily Google Search Rate

|                                      | DV: Search Popularity Index |                    |                   |                |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|
|                                      | BJY                         | Rahul Gandhi       | INC               | Narendra Modi  | BJP             |
|                                      | (1)                         | (2)                | (3)               | (4)            | (5)             |
| BJY <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> | 46.49***<br>(6.73)          | 45.32***<br>(3.19) | 3.91***<br>(1.24) | 0.32<br>(0.70) | 2.92*<br>(1.52) |
| Observations                         | 4144                        | 4144               | 4440              | 4884           | 4588            |
| State FEs                            | ✓                           | ✓                  | ✓                 | ✓              | ✓               |
| Day FEs                              | ✓                           | ✓                  | ✓                 | ✓              | ✓               |
| Mean of DV                           | 8.65                        | 16.06              | 12.88             | 6.31           | 14.4            |

Notes: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. SEs clustered at the state level. The variable Post equals 1 only while the Yatra is physically present in a given state, and switches to 0 once it leaves.

Table D.2: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Daily Google Search Rate (Post==1 Always)

|                                      | DV: Search Popularity Index |                    |                 |                |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|                                      | BJY                         | Rahul Gandhi       | INC             | Narendra Modi  | BJP             |
|                                      | (1)                         | (2)                | (3)             | (4)            | (5)             |
| BJY <sub>i</sub> x Post <sub>t</sub> | 13.54***<br>(3.39)          | 11.77***<br>(2.97) | -0.48<br>(0.79) | 0.17<br>(0.38) | -0.79<br>(0.99) |
| Observations                         | 4144                        | 4144               | 4440            | 4884           | 4588            |
| State FEs                            | ✓                           | ✓                  | ✓               | ✓              | ✓               |
| Day FEs                              | ✓                           | ✓                  | ✓               | ✓              | ✓               |
| Mean of DV                           | 8.65                        | 16.06              | 12.88           | 6.31           | 14.4            |

Notes: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. SEs clustered at the state level. Here, the variable Post switches to 1 once the Yatra enters a state and remains 1 thereafter, even after it has moved on.

For the Google Trends event study in the main text, we present the results using the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) method. Compared to other popular DiD estimators, the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) method is particularly appropriate for analyzing the effect of Rahul Gandhi's entry into Indian states on Google Trends popularity data due to its explicit modeling of staggered treatment timing and flexible estimation of group-time average treatment effects. Unlike two-way fixed effects (TWFE), which is known to produce biased estimates in staggered settings due to negative weighting and contamination from

already-treated units, the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) approach uses only appropriate comparison groups (e.g., not-yet-treated or never-treated states) for each treated group at each time. While `did2s` (Gardner 2022) and `sunab` (Sun and Abraham 2021) correct for TWFE biases and allow dynamic estimation, they focus primarily on event-time effects and assume a homogeneous dynamic treatment path across groups. In contrast, Callaway and Sant'Anna's method allows for treatment effect heterogeneity across both groups and time, making it better suited when different states may react differently or at different speeds to Rahul Gandhi's entry. This makes it the most appropriate method when both staggered timing and treatment effect heterogeneity are central concerns. Still, in Figures D.1, D.2, and D.3 we present the event study using alternative approaches and find similar results.

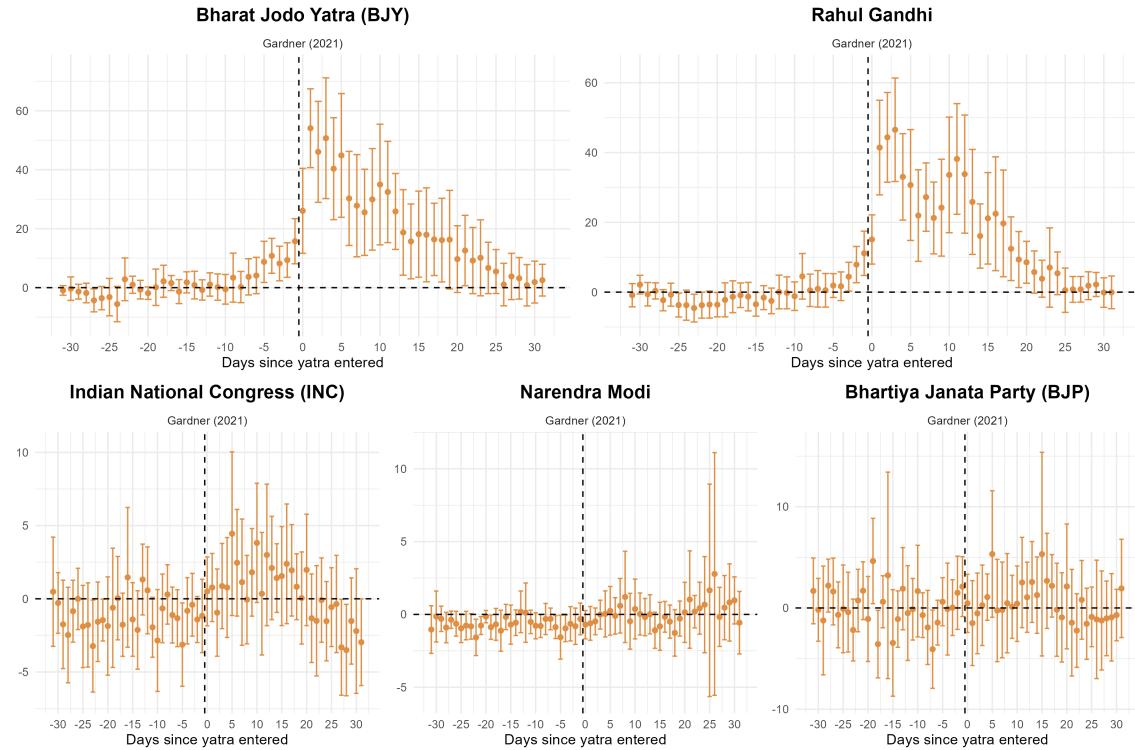


Figure D.1: Impacts of BGY on Google Search Outcomes (Gardner 2022)

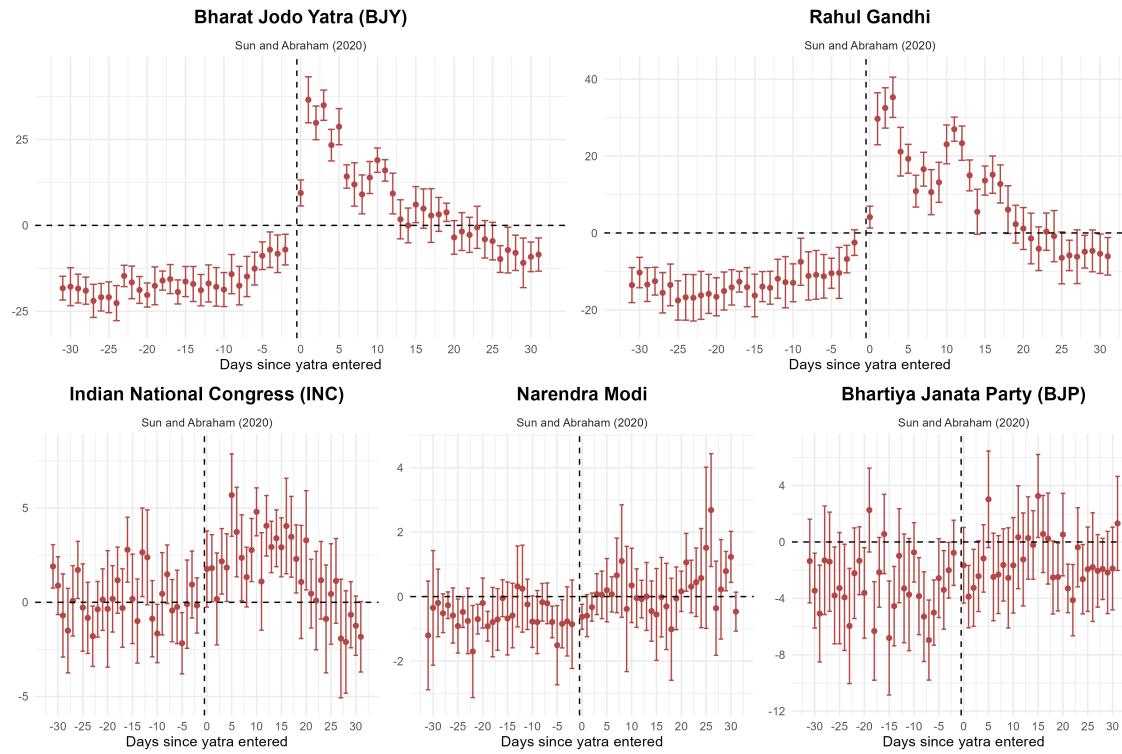


Figure D.2: Impacts of BJV on Google Search Outcomes (Sun and Abraham 2021)

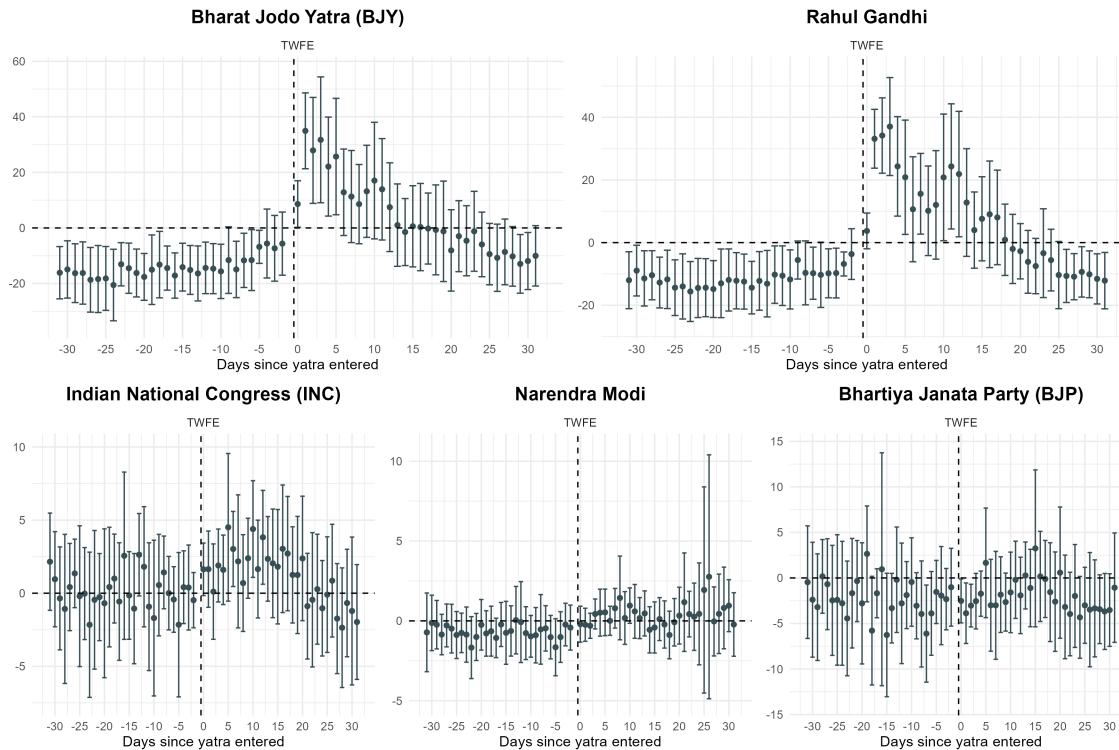


Figure D.3: Impacts of BJV on Google Search Outcomes (TWFE)

## E Phone Survey

### E.1 Survey Methodology and Details

Our telephone survey was conducted in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. Figure E.1 shows the ACs for which we have survey respondents.

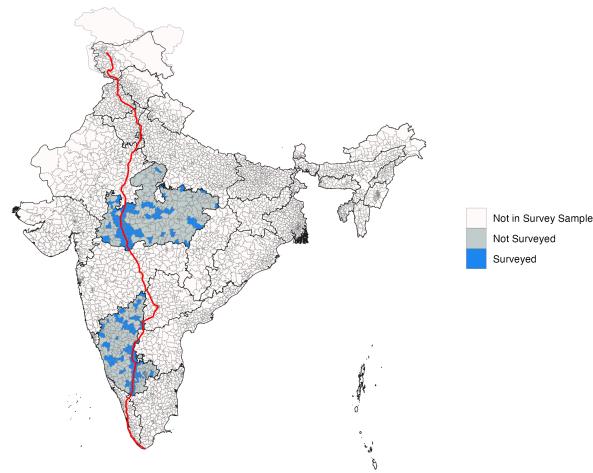


Figure E.1: Map of ACs in our Survey Data

We focus on 4 different subsets of respondents:

- All respondents
- BJP 2019 supporters: those who reported that they voted for the BJP when asked which party they supported in the 2019 Lok Sabha election
- INC 2019 supporters: those who reported that they voted for the INC when asked which party they supported in the 2019 Lok Sabha election
- BJV ACs respondents: those who were in assembly constituencies that they yatra passed through

We look at several outcome variables from the survey. Here we list each question for the outcomes.

- How has your opinion of Rahul Gandhi been in the past year - improved, stayed the same, worsened, don't know / can't say

- How has your opinion of the Congress Party been in the past year - improved, stayed the same, worsened, don't know / can't say
- How satisfied are you with the performance of Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi in the past year - very much satisfied, satisfied to some extent, not at all satisfied, don't know / can't say
- In the past year, did you feel that the INC was unified and had less infighting - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political engagement with INC (did at least one of the following):
  - Receive any political messages from Congress by phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Attend a Congress political meeting or election rally - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Get contacted by a party worker from Congress - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Attended a rally by a state leader - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political discourse about Rahul Gandhi (did at least one of the following)
  - Heard Rahul Gandhi discussed on television/phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Discussed Rahul Gandhi with neighbors - yes, no, don't know, refused
- In the past year, did you feel that the BJP was unified and had less infighting - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political engagement with BJP (did at least one of the following):
  - Receive any political messages from BJP by phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Attend a BJP political meeting or election rally - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Get contacted by a party worker from BJP - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Attended a rally by a state leader - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political discourse about Narendra Modi (did at least one of the following)
  - Heard Narendra Modi discussed on television/phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
  - Discussed Narendra Modi with neighbors - yes, no, don't know, refused
- If the Lok Sabha election was held today, which party would you vote for?
- Which party did you vote for in the 2023 Vidhan Sabha election?

## E.2 Survey Robustness

In the main text, we examine the relationship between participation in the yatra and a range of political outcomes using our survey data. Here we demonstrate robustness to conducting the analysis only on the Karnataka sample (Figure E.2), only on the Mahdyā Pradesha sample (Figure E.3), and with controls (Figure E.4).

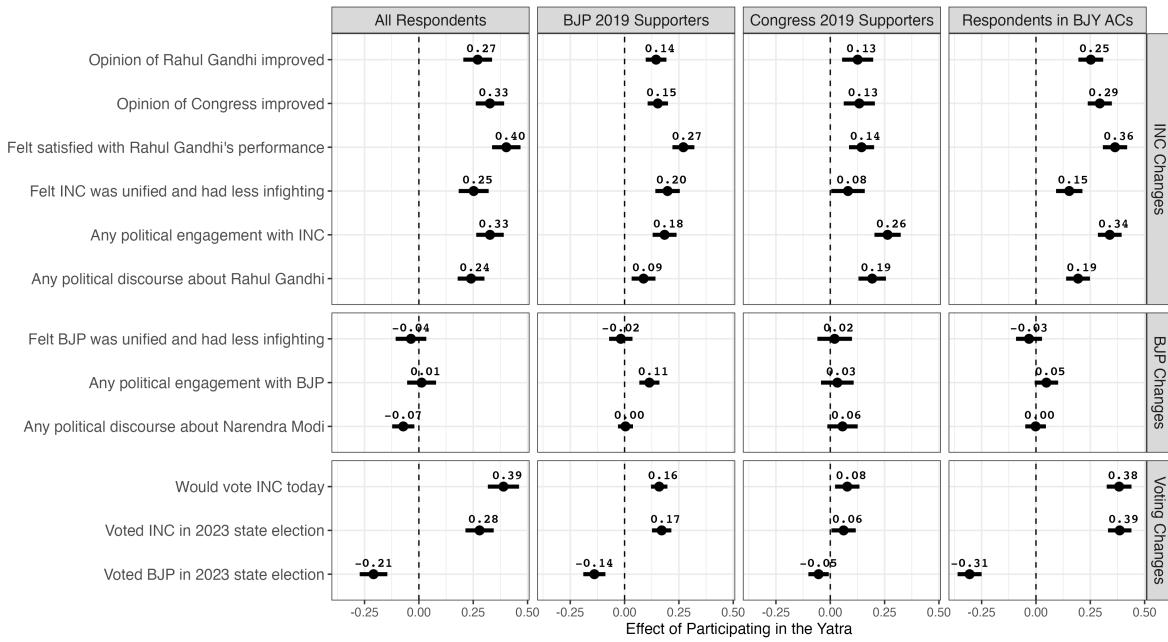


Figure E.2: Relationship between Participating in the Yatra and Political Outcomes (only Karnataka Sample)

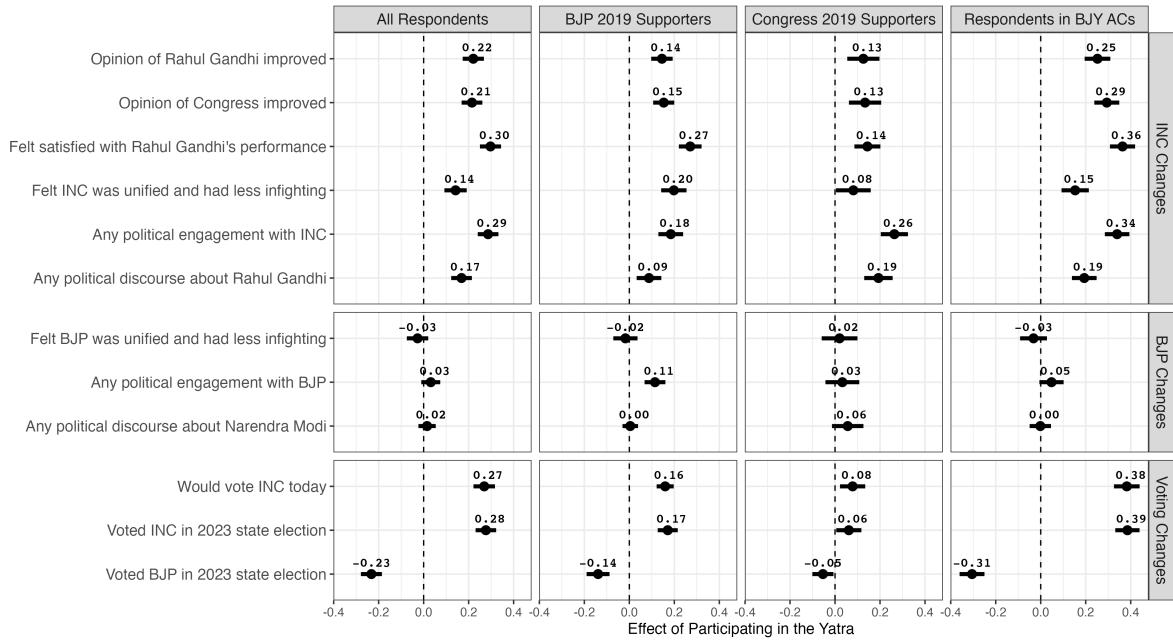


Figure E.3: Relationship between Participating in the Yatra and Political Outcomes (only Madhya Pradesh Sample)

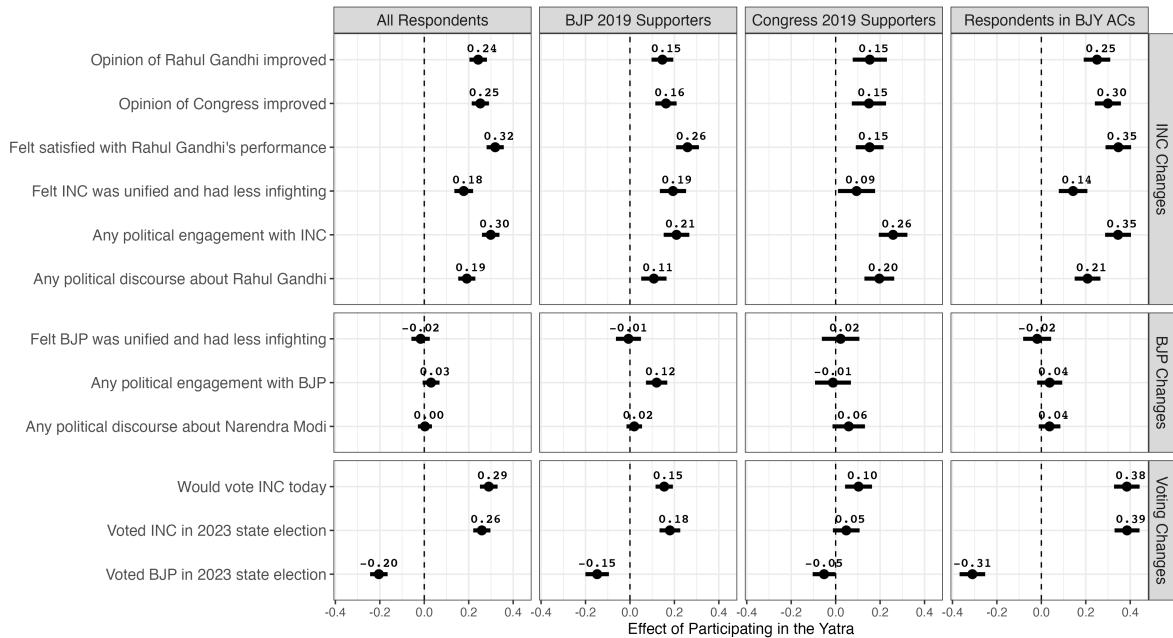


Figure E.4: Relationship between Participating in the Yatra and Political Outcomes (with Controls)

## **F Description of Interview Approach**

To supplement our understanding of the Bharat Jodo Yatra and the mechanisms for increased Congress voter share we conducted 20 interviews with party leaders and workers, civil society organization leaders, and voters, primarily in Karnataka, seven months after the election (additional interviews were also conducted over the phone and in Delhi with party functionaries involved in the overall BJV process). The party and organizational interviewees were sampled through a snowball sample from reaching out to initial party officials and from visiting the Congress party office in Bangalore. The voters were sampled in both Bangalore district and Mysore district through a snowball sample as well. These interviews are not structured to qualitatively test our argument but rather to supplement our understanding and ground-truth the mechanism for the BJV effects.