

Book Reviews

Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India. By Pradeep K. Chhibber and Rahul Verma. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 336p. \$99.00 cloth, \$31.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592719000781

— Simon Chauchard, *Columbia University*

Partisan politics is often said to have little to do with ideology in India. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma's impressive new book is intended to bury this perception, and in the process unpack the role of ideology in Indian politics. This makes it both a remarkable and an original addition to the rapidly accumulating scholarship on India, and as such, one that is required reading for all analysts of Indian politics.

Political scientists working on Indian elections over the past 20 years have largely overlooked ideology in their analyses. Most scholars have instead emphasized the role of ethnicity, patronage, vote buying, corruption, and to a lesser extent, personalistic politics. Those few scholars who have actively asked whether India's party system could be defined as ideological may in turn have made too much of the fact that the main parties have implemented similar macroeconomic policies, and not enough of the fact that they might have differed on other—yet to be labeled—dimensions.

Chhibber and Verma take on this ambitious task in *Ideology and Identity*. The authors adapt to India the argument on party systems that Lipset and Rokkan once famously put forth about Western Europe. After convincingly showing that Western European cleavages are irrelevant to the Indian context, the authors name the cleavages around which partisan conflict tends to be structured in the long run in India, as well as the historical events that first led to these durable lines of fracture. The first cleavage is around the “politics of statism” (the extent to which the state preserves social norms or attempts to change them), while the second is around the “politics of recognition” (whether and how the state accommodates minorities). They also argue that these divisions have their origins in the foundational debates that took place in the country around independence, and that they have remained stable ever since, both among elites and voters. In that sense, the suggestion is that Indian politics may never have really recovered from the foundational debates among Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Nehru, and other elites around a small number of key issues, such as the need for reservations policies.

The authors draw on an impressive array of data to test their argument. Relying on data from the National Election Study, they show in Chapter 2 that supporters of the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) diverged on these two dimensions in 2014. More generally, they show that preference for the BJP was correlated to beliefs about statism and recognition. Later in the book, they show that the relative stands of the

main political parties on these two dimensions have been relatively stable over time (Chapter 8). In a welcome departure from stereotypical readings of Indian politics, Chhibber and Verma reinterpret party politics in India since 1970 in terms of ideology. They show that the demise of the Congress Party, which their tests show to be stably centrist on both dimensions (the party is often referred to as “catch-all”), may have to do with the party's ideological positioning. In short, the party's tenacious hold on the center progressively opened spaces on its flanks on either or both aforementioned ideological dimensions. These are precisely the areas in which both regional parties and the BJP invested. In that sense, the authors show that it might be wrong to think of regional parties as non-ideological. Insofar as their emergence is owing to a disagreement with Congress on one of these ideological dimensions, they may be aptly described as ideological themselves (Chapter 9). More generally, spectacular changes in India's party system over the years, though they are rarely characterized as such, may have everything to do with ideological positioning in a two-dimensional space. And a party's survival may have more to do with its strategic positioning in that space than is traditionally thought.

Additional chapters advance other aspects of the argument. Drawing on archival sources, chapter 3 retraces the origins of these cleavages in the Constituent Assembly, and before. Chapter 5 effectively challenges the idea that Indian elections can be reduced to clientelism. Making use of a remarkable assemblage of data, the authors show that elected politicians may have less to give than is commonly argued, have no real ability to monitor voters, and probably have too few resources to generate an effective quid pro quo system with voters. Meanwhile, voters have no clear sense of who delivers a benefit and where to attribute it, and their ideology correlates much more strongly with political behavior than gifts and goodies do. Chapter 6 provides welcome evidence for the role of national leaders in this picture, since preferences for specific leaders emerge as the prime motivation behind vote choices. Drawing on a fascinating experiment, the authors provide suggestive evidence that voters follow leaders—especially Narendra Modi—for their ideas as well as for their perceived capacity to lead.

At the end of this masterful demonstration, no reader will be left believing that ideology deserves to be overlooked in the study of Indian elections, or that Indian elections can be reduced to a game of musical chairs between elites or to patronage. If it ever was disputed, it is now clear that ideology does matter, and that scholars' persistent avoidance of the term “ideology” when thinking of Indian politics was, at best, arbitrary. At the same time, as any groundbreaking work does, the book raises new questions that future contributions will need to tackle.

Five areas of inquiry especially strike me as worth additional scholarship. First, now that the authors have convinced us that ideology deserves more respect in our analyses, we may all want to know exactly *how much* respect. Empirical challenges make it difficult for them to be more precise on this front, and it is genuinely difficult to quantify it. Nonetheless, it is easy to imagine that observers of Indian politics would next want to know whether ideology is the *main* factor in partisan politics or simply one among many.

Second, and relatedly, what might be the constellation of possible factors that do play a role in electoral politics in India? While I agree with Chibber and Verma that there is surprisingly little evidence to show that clientelism drives voting behavior, it does not necessarily follow that ideology does. Fleeting campaign dynamics may drive vote choices in ways we have not completely identified; political styles and image building may deserve further examination. So too does economic voting, as voters in some states appear to practice a form of retrospective economic voting that would not fit neatly in the authors' framework. This is, of course, less a critique than a candid observation of the fact that much remains to be explored when thinking about voting behavior in India.

Turning to the third topic for future research, we will need to think of how to reconcile the relative ideological stability described in *Ideology and Identity* with what happens during campaigns on the ground, that is, a very unequal focus on ideology across candidates and constituencies, and a frequent tendency among elites to tailor their product to the audience they happen to have in front of them.

Fourth, while the book's focus on the politics of statism and recognition provides us with an appealing frame of analysis, it may be worth further discussion. The "politics of statism" is a potentially very broad area—which may explain its uneven impact on some outcomes of interest—and one that we may want to further unpack. Besides, it is not readily obvious that these are the only two dimensions that should matter. Voters' positioning on secularism or anticorruption may, for instance, come to better explain partisan divisions in the future.

Finally, we may want to know more as to why voters embrace the ideologies identified by the authors. Chapters 4 and 7 start tackling this question. Yet more exciting work probably remains to be done in the aftermath of this pathbreaking book before we fully understand how and why voters sort themselves ideologically.

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