

The Electoral Consequences of Mass Religious Events

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Background

Research question:

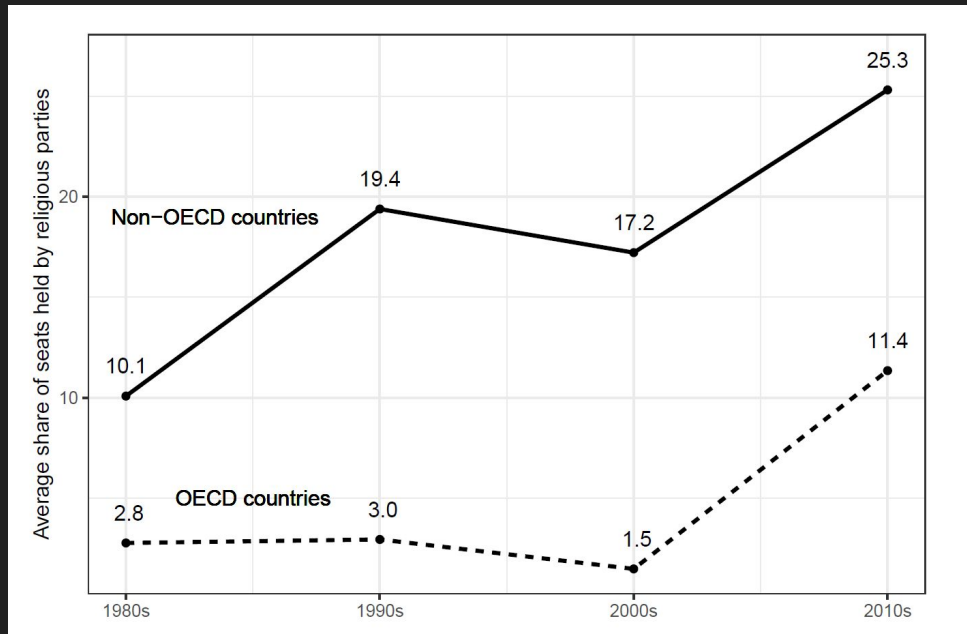
- Do mass religious events generate votes for religious parties?

Motivation:

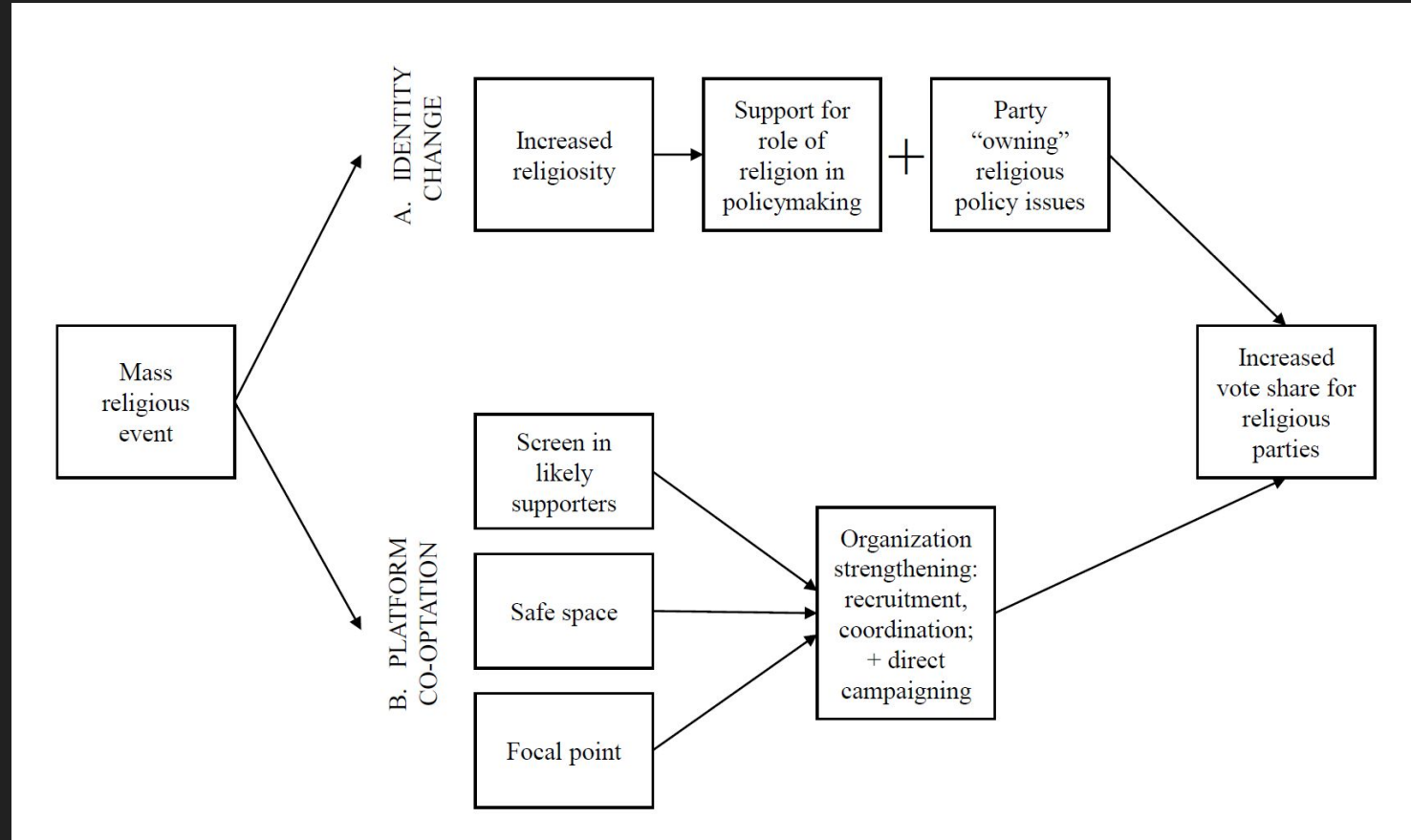
- Global ascent of ethno-religious nationalism (Turkey, Israel, Sri Lanka...)
- Dominant focus recently on material handouts in producing religious party support
- Relationship between *religious practice* and electoral politics less investigated

Case:

- Kumbh Mela in India
 - Hindu religious festival believed to be world's largest human assembly
 - Occurs approximately once every 3 years, rotating between four cities in the north and west
- Hindu nationalism, notably the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has surged in recent decades



Hypothesis: Mass religious gatherings boost support for religious parties. Why?



India's Kumbh Mela

- Takes place every 12 years in Nasik, Ujjain, Haridwar, and Prayag
- Also 6-year “half Melas” in Haridwar and Prayag
- Timing of the Melas astrologically determined
- Millions of pilgrims gather at Mela sites for 1-3 months
- Melas exemplify an “effervescent” environment for religious socialization (Durkheim)
- Plentiful political and politics-adjacent activities happen at Melas (e.g. VHP mobilization around Ayodhya)
- We compiled list of all 39 full and ardh melas since 1944



Research design

Units:

- 1961 district/Lok Sabha election year
- All Lok Sabha races, 1951-2019
- Elections panel made by geolocating constituencies' "titular towns" (pre-1977) or centroids (post-1977) in 1961 district boundaries

Outcome:

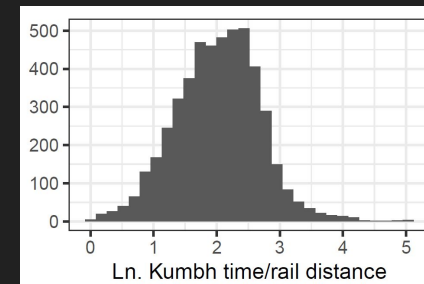
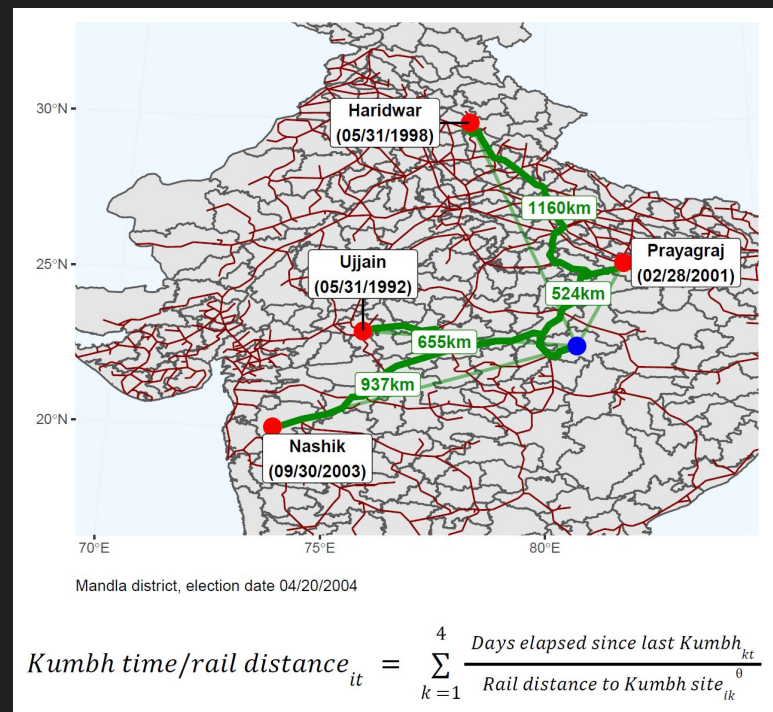
- Vote share for Hindu nationalist parties (BJP, BJS, Hindu Mahasabha, Ram Rajya Parishad, Shiv Sena, Janata coalition)

Treatment variable:

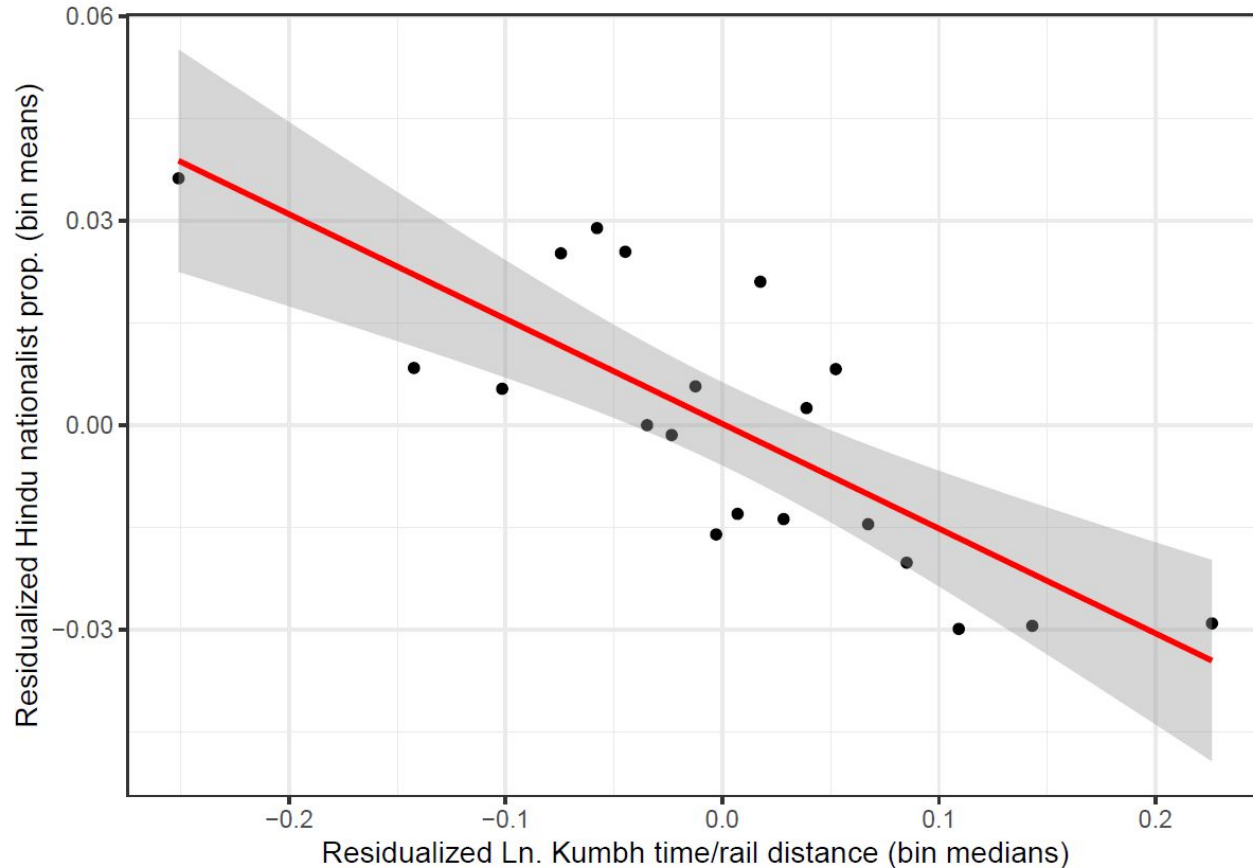
- What is a district's intensity of "exposure" to the Kumbh for a given election?
- Challenge: capture (i) spatial [rail] *and* temporal distance (ii) to all four sites
- See equation
- Basic idea from trade/gravity models: changes in time elapsed produce more variation in the treatment variable for districts that are geographically close
- Also use non-continuous version, breaking out time and spatial components

Design:

- Generalized difference-in-differences



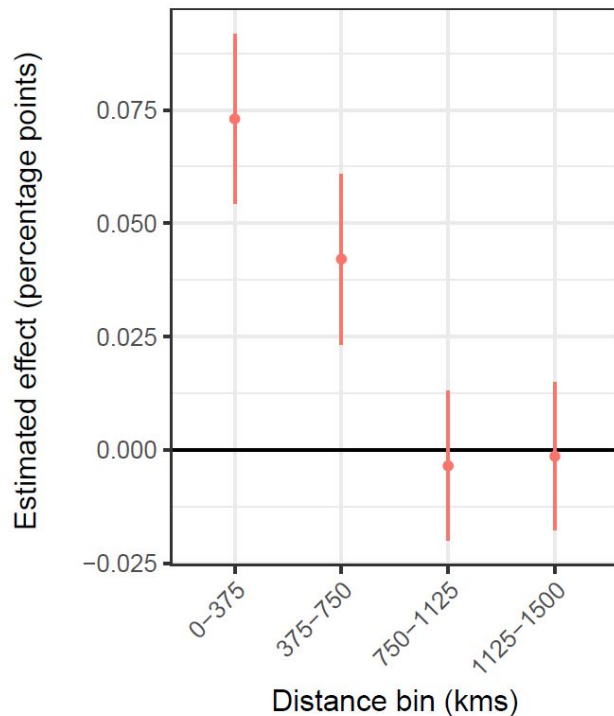
Results: impact on Hindu nationalist vote share



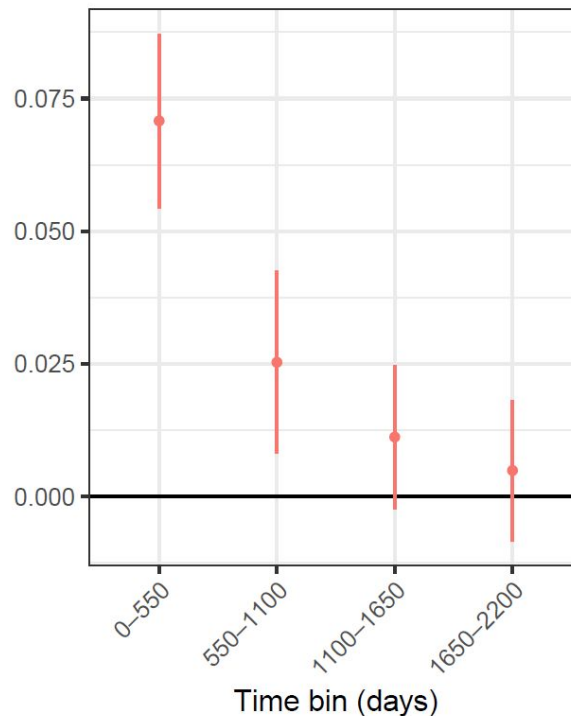
Halving the Kumbh time/rail distance → 7.8 percentage point increase in share of votes secured by Hindu nationalist parties

Results: impact on Hindu nationalist vote share

A. Estimated effect on Hindu nationalist vote share of a Kumbh occurring < 1.5 years before an election



B. Estimated effect on Hindu nationalist vote share of a Kumbh occurring < 375 kms away



Mechanism 1: Kumbhs increase religiosity

	<i>Any Household Expenditure:</i>	
	Meat, Fish, Eggs (1)	Priest (2)
Ln. Kumbh time/rail distance	0.024*** (0.008)	0.002 (0.007)
Outcome mean	0.60	0.08
1991 District FEs	Y	Y
NSS Round FEs	Y	Y
Observations	638,337	638,337
Adjusted R ²	0.329	0.145

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

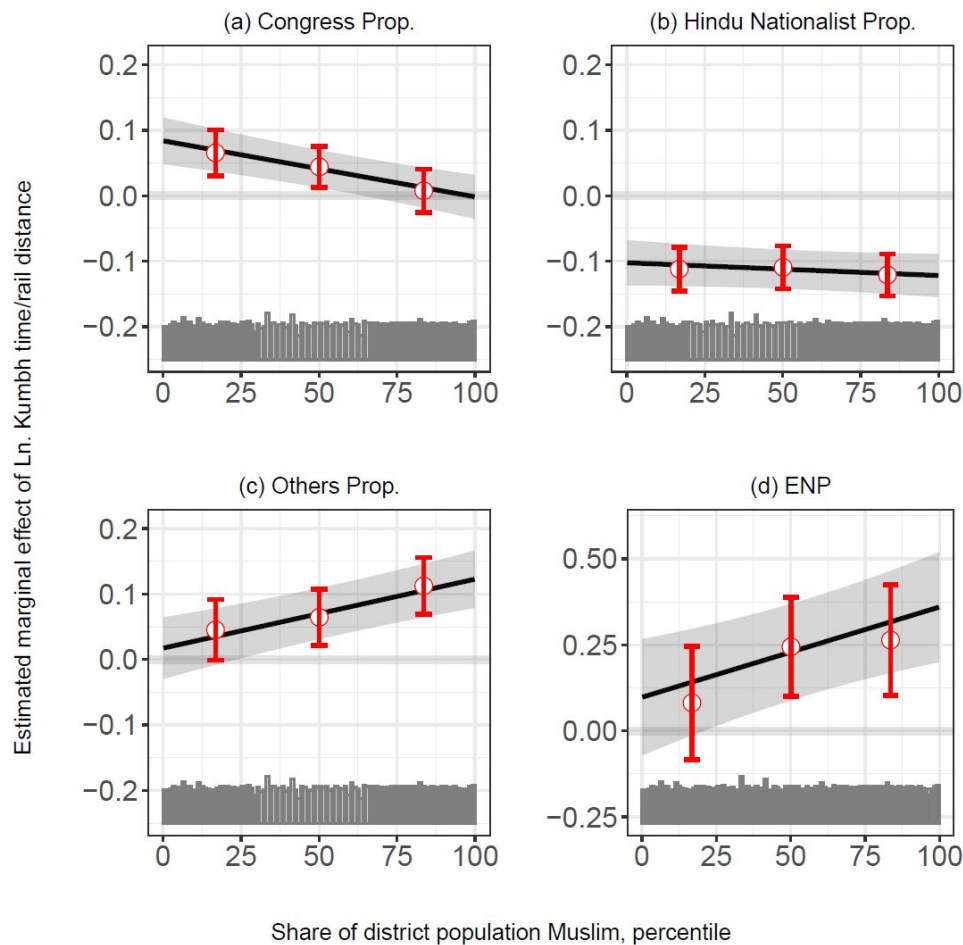
Also, modest but statistically significant increases in the probability of Hindu-Muslim riots breaking out

Mechanism 2: Platform co-optation

Greater exposure increases likelihood of:

- *Any* Hindu Nationalist Candidate Fielded in elections
- *Loyal* Hindu nationalist Candidate fielded

What happens to other parties?



- Kumbh causes Congress to lose votes in areas with small Muslim population share
- These losses disappear as Muslim share grows
- Potentially: Muslims fearing Hindu nationalist rule are banding behind Congress – strategic consolidation

Conclusions

- Mass religious events can enhance the vote share of religious parties
- They can do so by:
 - Inducing social identity change
 - Providing platforms for religious parties to campaign and organize
- Downstream effects include electoral polarization along secular/religious cleavage
- The Kumbh case illustrates the potential of collective religious practice to transform the electoral landscape of young democracies