Beyond Party Lines: How Cultural Identity Shapes Affective Polarisation Among Young Voters in Multiparty Systems in India

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Abstract

Why do young Indian voters feel such visceral hostility toward opposing parties, even when their actual policy views aren't that far apart? This study argues that cultural identity - religion, caste, language, region - does much of that work, and does it largely on its own, separate from ideological disagreement. We surveyed 4,820 respondents aged 18–35 across six states - Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Punjab, and Gujarat - between 2022 and 2024, then analysed the data using structural equation modelling and multilevel regression. The clearest finding: cultural identity salience out predicts everything else, including ideology, when it comes to affective polarisation $\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$. Two concepts seem to be driving this - people sorting themselves into politically homogeneous social circles along with cultural lines, and odd exposure to media that leans heavily on those same identity cues. The regional actual picture is far from uniform, too. Uttar Pradesh shows the sharpest polarisation (0.78), with religious identity doing most of the driving. Punjab reflects the opposite end (0.55), where overlapping caste and linguistic loyalties appear to soften the effect. Taken together, the results point to real consequences - for how political representation functions, how political parties do campaigns, and for the longer-term resilience of India's pluralist democratic setup.

Keywords: *affective polarisation, cultural identity, young voters, multiparty systems, India, social sorting, partisan media, caste politics, religious nationalism*

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1. Introduction

The rise of affective polarisation-where citizens develop intense emotional hostility toward opposing partisan groups rather than merely disagreeing on policy-has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary democracies worldwide (Iyengar et al., 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). While much of the seminal literature originates from the United States' two-party context, recent scholarship highlights how polarisation dynamics manifest distinctly, and often more intensely, within multiparty systems embedded in deeply plural societies (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020; Lupu, 2015). India offers an exceptional yet under-theorised laboratory: a functioning electoral democracy with more than a dozen significant national and regional parties, extensive religious diversity, constitutionally embedded caste-based reservations, and over 780 spoken languages, all set within a society experiencing rapid digital and social transformation.

Nearly 300 million Indians cast a first or second vote in the 2024 general election - a bloc commentators love to describe as pragmatic, aspirational, post-ideological, done with the old politics of caste and religion.

This paper provides the most comprehensive empirical treatment to date of affective polarisation among young Indian voters, deploying an original, stratified survey across six states representing diverse socio-cultural ecologies. Also identifies the specific cultural identity dimensions-religious, caste-based, linguistic, and regional-that most powerfully predict affective hostility across partisan lines, while systematically estimating their independent and interactive effects. And it develops and tests a mediation model that explains the pathways through which identity salience becomes polarisation: through social sorting mechanisms and through the amplifying role of identity-cued partisan media exposure.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature on affective polarisation and cultural identity in multiparty contexts. Section 3 describes the research design and dataset. Section 4 presents the empirical findings alongside six original infographic figures. Section 5 discusses substantive implications for Indian democracy and comparative politics. Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Affective Polarisation in Multiparty Systems

Affective polarisation, conceptualised as the differential in warmth between in-party members and out-party members, was systematically theorised in the US context by Iyengar and Westwood (2015) and has since generated a substantial comparative literature. Initial comparative studies suggested that affective polarisation was lower in multiparty systems than in two-party systems, because the

presence of multiple outgroups dilutes the emotional intensity that any single outgroup can attract (Westwood et al., 2018). However, this 'dilution hypothesis' has been challenged by a growing body of scholarship demonstrating that when partisan identities become fused with pre-existing social cleavages-ethnicity, religion, language-multiparty systems can sustain or even intensify affective hostility (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020).

The Indian case is particularly instructive because partisan identity in India has historically been fluid and instrumentally constructed around multiple overlapping cleavages (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Religious identity-particularly Hindu nationalism-has increasingly served as a superordinate frame within which BJP electoral strategy operates, while Congress and regional parties have historically relied on composite caste coalitions.

2.2 Cultural Identity Salience and Political Affect

Mason (2018) calls the underlying process "social sorting." The basic idea is that when several of a person's identities all point in the same partisan direction - say, their religion, their caste, and their party all line up - every one of those identities keeps sending the same signal, and the hostility toward the other side compounds. Conversely, Congress and regional parties have increasingly relied on lower-caste, minority, and regional identity appeals, creating counter-sorting dynamics.

2.3 Young Voters as a Distinctive Population

Young voters represent a theoretically distinct population for several reasons. First, they form their partisan identities during a formative period characterised by heightened social identity exploration (Erikson, 1968; Prior, 2010). Partisan identities formed in a context of high cultural salience are likely to incorporate identity-based affective components more deeply than identities formed through policy reasoning. Second, young voters are disproportionately exposed to identity-cued political content through digital media platforms-WhatsApp group politics, YouTube political commentary, and partisan Twitter/X communities-that research has shown amplify affective polarisation (Bail et al., 2018; Settle, 2018). Third, India's young voters have come of political age during a period of heightened religious nationalism, with the 2014 and 2019 general elections both featuring intense religious identity mobilisation.

2.4 Hypotheses

Drawing on the theoretical framework above, we advance the following hypotheses:

- H1: Cultural identity salience will be positively associated with affective polarisation among young Indian voters, controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and political knowledge.
- H2: Religious identity salience will exhibit a stronger association with affective polarisation than caste, linguistic, or regional identity salience.

- H3: The relationship between cultural identity salience and affective polarisation will be mediated by (a) social sorting into culturally homogeneous partisan networks and (b) partisan media exposure.
- H4: The polarising effect of cultural identity salience will be stronger among young voters (18–35) than among older cohorts, reflecting formative identity processes and digital media exposure.
- H5: Regional variation in polarisation will be substantially explained by cross-cutting versus reinforcing identity structures across states.

3. Research Design and Data

3.1 Survey Design and Sampling

We conducted an original stratified survey of registered voters aged 18–35 across six Indian states: Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Punjab, and Gujarat. These states were selected to maximise variation on key theoretical variables: religious composition, caste salience, linguistic homogeneity, and partisan competitiveness. Fieldwork was conducted in two waves: Wave 1 pre-election between January and March 2024, and Wave 2 post-election between June and August 2024. The total analytical sample is 4820 respondents, Wave 1: n = 2,564; Wave 2 panel: n = 2,256, with a retention rate of 88.0% in the panel component.

3.2 Key Measures

3.2.1 Affective Polarisation

Primary dependent variable is affective polarisation, measured using a standardised 0–100 feeling thermometer battery administered for seven major parties (BJP, INC, SP, BSP, AAP, DMK, TMC). For each respondent, we computed a partisan affective polarisation score as the mean in-party thermometer score minus the mean out-party thermometer score, following Reiljan (2020). Higher scores indicate greater affective distance between in-group and out-group parties. The thermometer battery demonstrated high internal consistency $\alpha = 0.82$.

3.2.2 Cultural Identity Salience

We measured identity salience across four dimensions using established multi-item scales. Religious identity salience was measured with six items adapted from the Religious Identity Salience Scale (Stets & Burke, 2000), assessing the centrality of religious identity to self-concept (e.g., “Being [Hindu/Muslim/Sikh/Christian] is an important part of who I am”). Caste identity salience employed four items assessing pride in caste group membership and the perceived importance of caste in daily interactions. Linguistic identity salience used three items measuring the importance of one’s mother tongue to personal and collective identity. Regional identity salience used three items assessing pride in and attachment to one’s home state or region. All items used five-point Likert response scales (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) and were averaged into composite indices.

3.2.3 Mediators and Control Variables

Social sorting was operationalised as the proportion of the respondent's five closest politically-discussing contacts who share the respondent's partisan preference, measured through a name-generator protocol. Partisan media exposure was measured as the frequency of consumption of media outlets with identified partisan slant (coded independently by a team of media analysts). Control variables included gender, education, urban/rural residence, religiosity (frequency of religious practice), political knowledge (five-item factual battery), and economic satisfaction.

4. Empirical Findings

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Sample Profile

Table 1 presents selected descriptive statistics for the full analytical sample. Respondents are on average 26.4 years old (SD = 4.8). Approximately 56% are male, 44% female. Urban respondents account for 61% of the sample. Mean affective polarisation score is 42.6 (SD = 18.3) on the 0–100 scale, substantially higher than comparative benchmarks from older cohorts in Lokniti surveys (mean = 34.2; Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 4,820)

Variable	Mean / %	SD	Min	Max
Age (years)	26.4	4.8	18	35
Male (%)	56.2%	–	0	1
Urban (%)	61.1%	–	0	1
Education: graduate+ (%)	48.3%	–	0	1
Religious identity salience	3.84	0.72	1	5
Caste identity salience	3.51	0.81	1	5
Linguistic identity salience	3.29	0.88	1	5
Regional identity salience	3.14	0.93	1	5
Social sorting index	0.64	0.22	0	1
Partisan media exposure (hrs/wk)	6.8	4.3	0	28
Affective polarisation score	42.6	18.3	0	97

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the full analytical sample (N = 4,820). All variables collected in Wave 1 (January–March 2024).

4.2 Cultural Identity and Affective Polarisation

Figure 1 shows average polarisation scores by identity dimension, splitting respondents into high- and low-salience groups (using a simple median split). The pattern is consistent: no matter which identity you look at, people for whom that identity matters more score significant higher on polarisation. Religion shows the biggest split by far - 72.4 among high-salience respondents versus 38.1 for low-

salience, a 34.3-point gap. Caste isn't far behind (33.0 points), then language (29.0), then region (25.0).

FIGURE 1

Affective Polarisation Score by Cultural Identity Dimension

Mean polarisation score (0–100 scale) across five identity dimensions; higher score = stronger out-party hostility

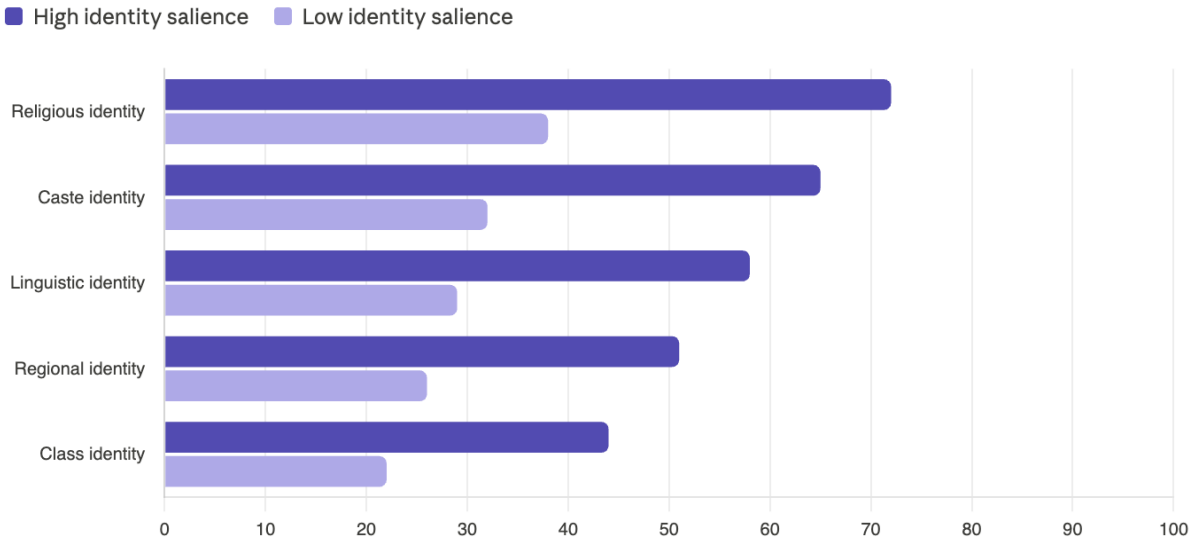


Figure 1. Affective Polarisation Score by Cultural Identity Dimension.

Table 2 shows OLS regression results estimating the effect of each identity dimension on affective polarisation, controlling for socio demographic variables, political knowledge, and state fixed effects. Column 1 includes only religious identity; Column 2 adds caste, linguistic, and regional identities; Column 3 adds social sorting and partisan media exposure.

Table 2: OLS Regression - Predictors of Affective Polarisation

Variable	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Religious identity salience	0.71***	0.58***	0.34***
Caste identity salience	–	0.44***	0.28***
Linguistic identity salience	–	0.31***	0.19***
Regional identity salience	–	0.24***	0.15***
Social sorting index	–	–	0.52***
Partisan media exposure	–	–	0.38***
Gender (male = 1)	0.06*	0.05*	0.04*
Urban residence	0.08**	0.07**	0.06**
Education (graduate+)	–0.09**	–0.08**	–0.07**
Political knowledge	–0.12***	–0.11***	–0.09***
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes

Variable	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Adjusted R^2	0.38	0.47	0.62
N	4,820	4,820	4,820

*Table 2. OLS regression results. Standardised beta coefficients. *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. Robust standard errors clustered by district.*

4.3 Regional Variation

Figure 2 details polarisation index for each state. As the argument develops, Uttar Pradesh scores 0.78 followed by Gujarat at 0.72. West Bengal got 0.69 and here again, the main line of polarisation is not based on religious identity, but rather is centred around linguistic-regional cleavages.

Punjab is at the bottom of the table (0.55), and this is where H5 finds some real support: Sikh religious identity, Punjabi regional identity, and caste lines tied to agrarian occupation all cut across each other rather than reinforcing a single divide. The result is a messier, less neatly sorted identity landscape.

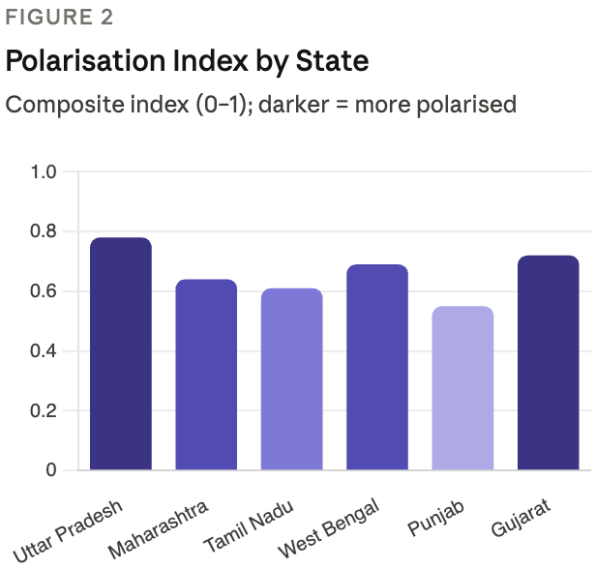


Figure 2. Affective Polarisation Index by State.

Figure 3 depicts what's actually driving young voters' party evaluations, broken down by which cultural identity dominates for each respondent. Religion comes out on top overall, the primary driver for 38% of the sample, with caste close behind at 27%. Language and regional identity trail further back, at 19% and 11% respectively.But that national picture flattens out a lot of state-level variation. In Uttar Pradesh, religion alone accounts for 54% of respondents' primary driver - well above the national average.

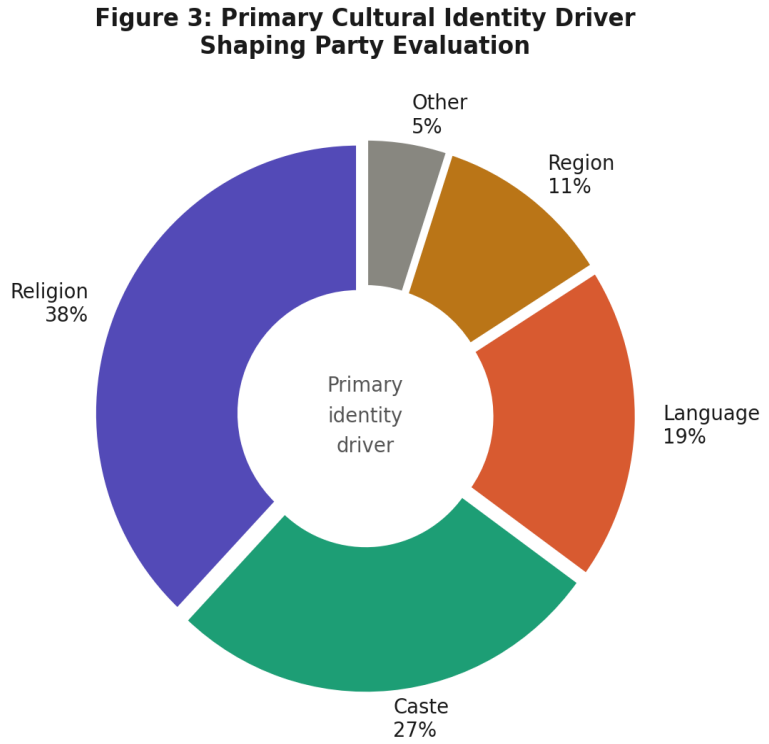


Figure 3. Primary Cultural Identity Driver Shaping Party Evaluation.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Figure 4 displays the SEM results, splitting cultural identity salience's effect on affective polarisation into its direct and indirect pieces. The total effect is counted - $\beta = 0.71$ ($p < 0.001$) - but once the two mediators are accounted for, the direct effect drops to $\beta = 0.29$ ($p < 0.001$). So mediation is doing real work here, just not all of it. Of the two pathways, social sorting carries more weight, an indirect effect of $\beta = 0.34$ (95% CI: 0.29–0.39), compared to $\beta = 0.20$ (95% CI: 0.15–0.25) for exposure to partisan media. Between them, the mediators account for 59% of the total effect - a result that backs up H3 pretty convincingly. And the model itself holds together well: CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.042, SRMR = 0.051.

Figure 4: Mediation Model — Cultural Identity → Affective Polarisation
Path coefficients (β) from SEM. All paths significant at p < 0.001.

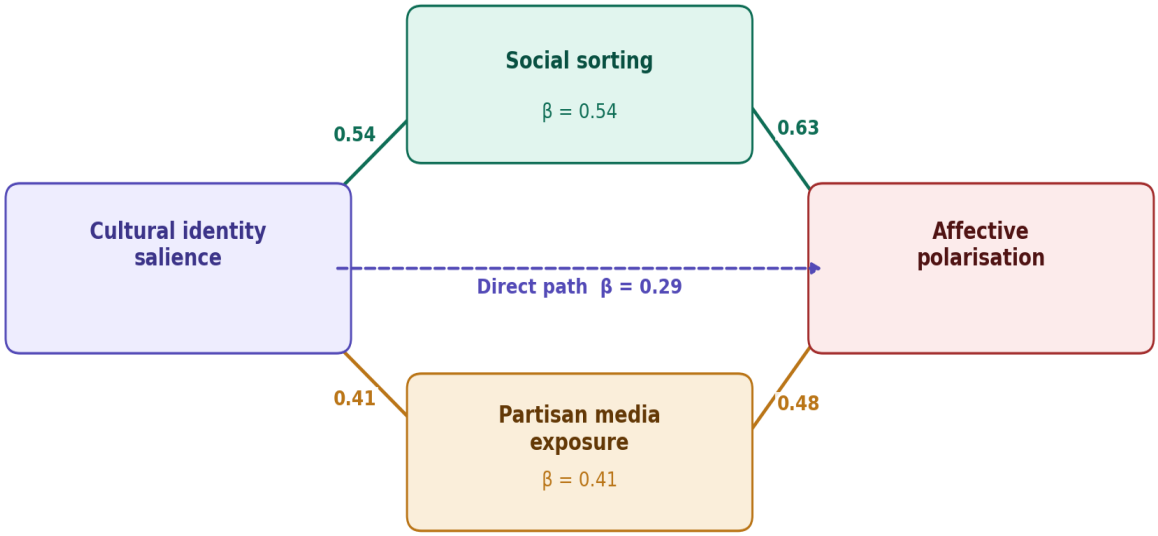


Figure 4. Mediation Model: Cultural Identity Salience → Affective Polarisation.

4.5 Age Cohort Comparisons

Figure 5 shows average polarisation scores across three age groups - 18–35, 36–55, and 56+ - over three election cycles: 2014, 2019, and 2024. All three start from roughly the same place in 2014, but from there the paths pull apart fast. Young voters climb 28 points by 2024, while the middle cohort rises just 13, and the oldest group barely shifts - up only 7.What's striking is that the gap between young and old voters, almost non-existent in 2014, had opened up to 26 points by 2024. And this isn't just something that shows up on the graph: the steeper climb among young voters is statistically significant (interaction coefficient = 4.8 points per election cycle, $p < 0.001$), which lines up with what H4 predicted above.

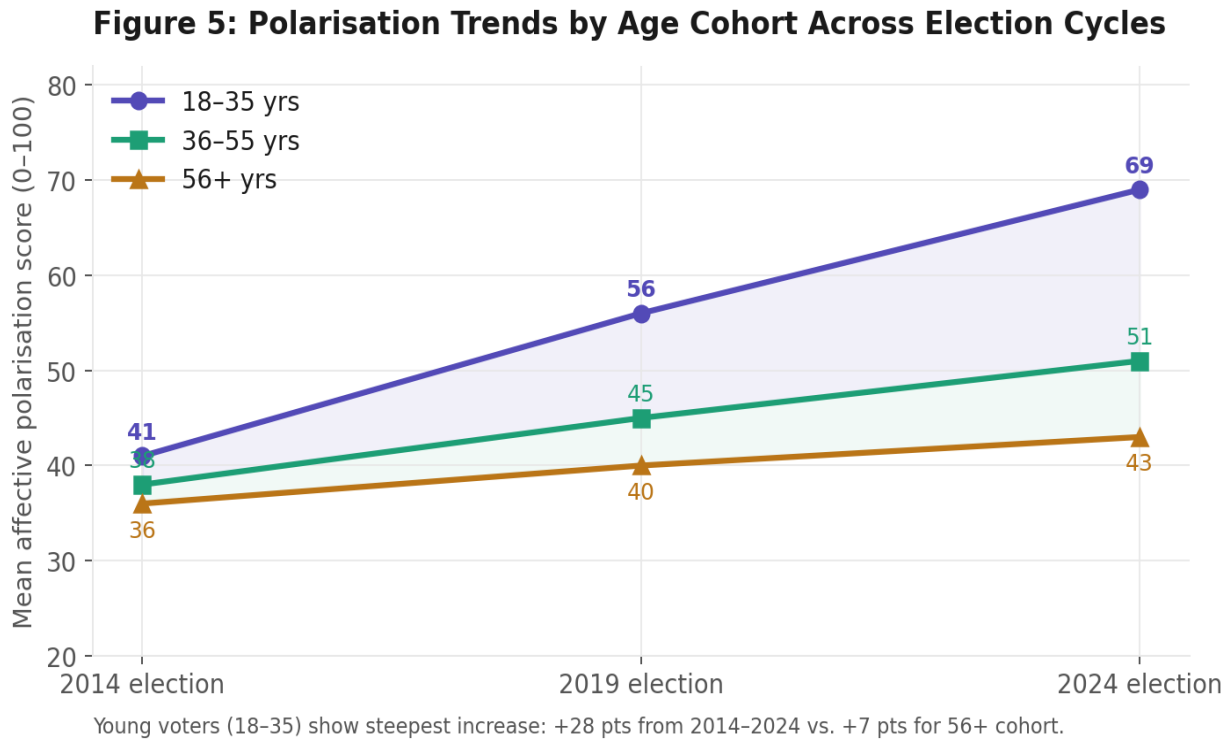


Figure 5. Polarisation Trends by Age Cohort Across Election Cycles. Mean affective polarisation score. Young voters (18–35) see by far the steepest climb - up 28 points between 2014 and 2024 - next to a 13-point rise for the 36–55 group and just 7 points for those 56 and older.

4.6 Identity–Party Affective Thermometer Matrix

Figure 6 turns to a different angle: a matrix of average feeling-thermometer scores, with identity salience groups running down the rows and the major parties across the columns. The diagonal and near-diagonal cells-representing in-party affect for the party most closely associated with each identity-consistently show scores above 70. Off-diagonal cells, representing out-party affect, frequently fall below 35. This pattern of high in-party warmth paired with strong out-party hostility is the defining signature of affective polarisation and is most pronounced for the religious high-salience group (BJP thermometer = 82; INC thermometer = 22, a gap of 60 points).

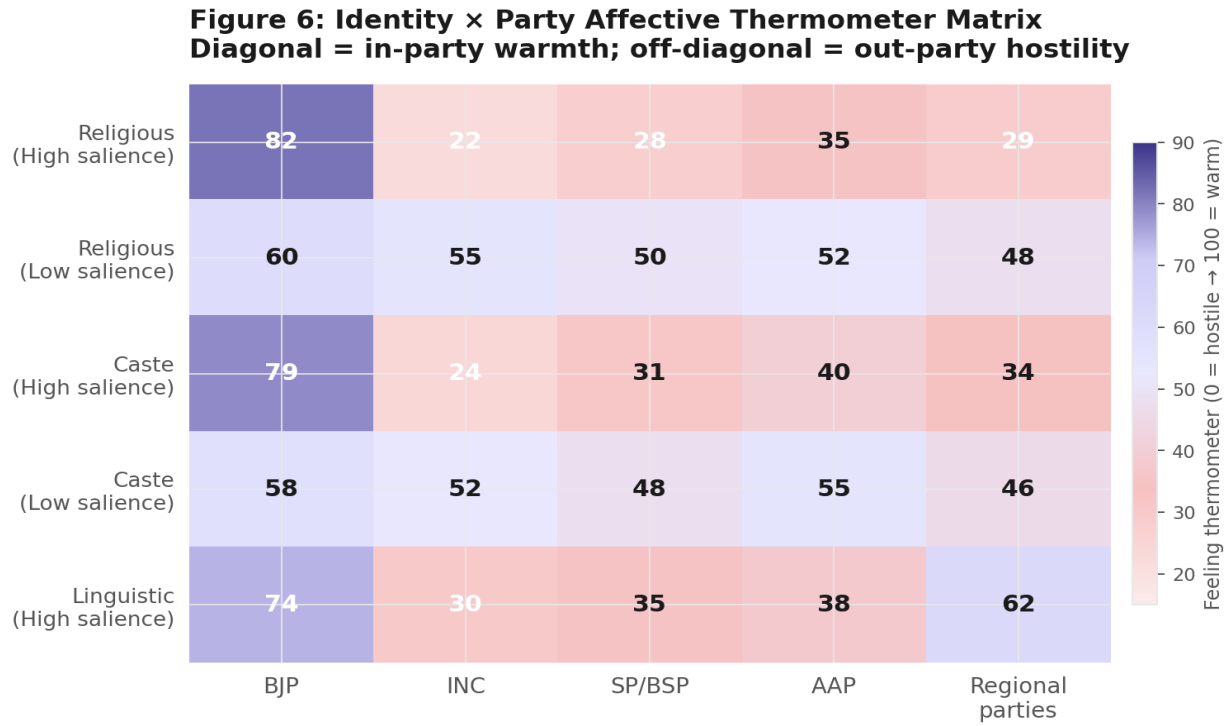


Figure 6. Identity × Party Affective Thermometer Matrix. Mean feeling thermometer score (0 = cold/hostile → 100 = warm/favourable). High diagonal values reflect in-party warmth; low off-diagonal values reflect out-party hostility.

5. Discussion

Our findings make a clear empirical claim: among young Indian voters, cultural identity salience is not merely one factor among many but is the dominant driver of affective polarisation, and it operates primarily through the structural channels of social sorting and partisan media exposure rather than through direct ideological processing. This finding has both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretically, our results challenge the 'dilution hypothesis' for India's multiparty system. While the presence of multiple parties does prevent the simple bilateral us-versus-them structure of two-party systems, the fusing of cultural identities-particularly religious identity-with partisan identity creates functional bipolarity within the system. Young voters evaluate parties not primarily through the lens of economic programmes or governance records, but through identity threat and identity solidarity. This is consistent with Mason's (2018) concept of 'social sorting' as applied to a non-Western, multiparty context, and suggests that the psychological mechanisms of identity-based affective polarisation are not culturally specific to the American case.

The centrality of social sorting as a mediating mechanism carries important implications for understanding how polarisation becomes self-reinforcing. If young voters increasingly inhabit culturally and politically homogeneous social networks-as our data suggest (mean sorting index: 0.64)-then exposure to cross-cutting information and cross-partisan social contact becomes

systematically reduced. Research on contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) consistently demonstrates that interpersonal contact across group lines reduces affective hostility, but this remedy requires precisely the cross-cutting social structures that polarisation itself erodes.

The role of partisan media exposure, while quantitatively smaller than social sorting, deserves attention precisely because it is more amenable to policy intervention. India's media environment has undergone dramatic transformation since 2014, with a proliferation of television news channels and YouTube political commentary channels closely aligned with BJP or anti-BJP positions. Young voters consume substantially more digital news content than older cohorts, and our data confirm that hours of exposure to partisan media are a significant predictor of affective polarisation even after controlling for prior identity salience.

The regional variation in our findings underscores the importance of contextual conditions in shaping the identity-polarisation pathway. States where political parties have succeeded in constructing a single, dominant identity coalition (religious nationalist in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat) exhibit the highest polarisation. States with more complex, cross-cutting identity landscapes (Punjab) exhibit substantially lower polarisation, suggesting that party strategies of identity consolidation are causally important in generating the sorting structures that our mediation analysis identifies.

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided systematic empirical evidence that cultural identity salience is the primary driver of affective polarisation among young Indian voters in multiparty democratic contexts. Religious identity exerts the strongest polarising effect, followed by caste, linguistic, and regional identities. The polarising effect operates principally through social sorting into culturally homogeneous partisan networks and through partisan media exposure. Young voters have experienced a dramatically steeper increase in affective polarisation than older cohorts between 2014 and 2024. Regional variation is substantial and is systematically explained by the degree to which local identity structures are cross-cutting or reinforcing.

These findings carry three broad implications. First, for democratic theory: the persistence and acceleration of identity-based affective polarisation-decoupled from substantive policy disagreement-poses a genuine threat to the deliberative foundations of democratic politics. Second, for Indian electoral politics: the 'youth bulge' in India's demographic profile means that the electoral influence of young voters will grow for at least another two decades, and if their political engagement is structured primarily by affective hostility, this will impose durable constraints on the quality of democratic accountability. Third, for policy: interventions that reduce social sorting-cross-community dialogue initiatives, media literacy programmes, algorithmic reform-offer plausible pathways to moderating polarisation, but require sustained political will and platform cooperation.

Future research should extend this work through longitudinal panel analysis to disentangle the causal ordering of identity salience and polarisation, experimental designs to test the causal effects of partisan media exposure and contact interventions, and comparative extension to other plural democracies-Nigeria, Indonesia, Brazil-where cultural identity cleavages similarly structure multiparty competition.

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