

Belonging, Bargaining, and the Ballot: Rethinking Partisan Attachments in India's East Zone

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ABSTRACT

Partisan identity has increasingly been theorized as a hybrid of expressive social belonging and instrumental evaluation. This qualitative study examines how that hybrid takes shape among young adult voters in Eastern India. Using purposive and convenience sampling, 23 adults with prior Lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha voting experience (Bihar = 10; West Bengal = 12; Odisha = 1) participated in 45-minute, semi-structured interviews conducted in Hindi and English. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed via reflexive thematic analysis. Four overarching themes emerged: Foundations of Partisan Identity family traditions, regional pride, linguistic assertion, religion/faith, and the variable salience of caste; Affective Expressions symbol-anchored loyalty, leader-focused attachments, emotionally valenced reinforcement, “elections as festival,” and symbolic resistance (including NOTA); Evaluative Rationales—performance-driven support, issue-triggered shifts (jobs, inflation, infrastructure), ethical expectations, inclusivity (women and youth), and strategic voting across electoral tiers; and Cues and Triggers local outreach, media and messaging (including WhatsApp), and wave effects under charismatic leadership. Together, the findings depict partisan identity as rooted yet adaptive: early socialization and group meanings scaffold attachment, while assessments of governance and context-specific cues recalibrate preferences. The study contributes an India-specific account of partisanship that integrates expressive identity with retrospective and strategic calculations, clarifies the evolving (not disappearing) role of caste, and illuminates how digital and local campaign ecologies activate identity in situation. Implications include refining theories of affective polarization in multiparty contexts, designing voter information interventions that respect identity while elevating performance signals, and broadening representation to meet voters’ inclusivity aspirations.

Keywords: *Partisan Identity, Affective Polarization, Strategic Voting, Thematic Analysis, Eastern India*

The study of partisan identity has evolved as a central theme in political behaviour research, moving from early conceptions of party affiliation as a rational choice to a more nuanced understanding of its psychological, social, and cultural roots. Early work in the mid-20th century, particularly *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960), laid the foundation by conceptualizing partisanship as a “psychological attachment” to a political party, acquired through early socialization and relatively stable over the life course. This

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perspective emphasized long-term loyalty and shaped decades of empirical research on voter behavior in the United States and beyond.

Building on this foundation, Fiorina (1981) in *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* challenged the static view by proposing that partisanship could be shaped by evaluations of government performance. This rational choice–influenced perspective suggested that party attachments might be more flexible and contingent on economic and political outcomes. However, subsequent research revealed that while retrospective evaluations influence vote choice, underlying partisan identity often conditions how such evaluations are formed in the first place (Bartels, 2002).

The cognitive revolution in political psychology further advanced the study of partisan identity. Scholars such as Green et al. (2002) argued that partisanship is best understood as a social identity rather than merely a voting habit. This approach drew on social identity theory, framing partisan identity as akin to ethnic, religious, or cultural attachments emotionally laden, resistant to change, and deeply connected to group belonging. Huddy et al. (2015) extended this framework, highlighting the emotional intensity of partisanship and the role of expressive partisanship in shaping not only vote choice but also perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and policy preferences.

In recent decades, the rise of affective polarization has become a key focus with Iyengar et al. (2012) documented how partisan identity increasingly operates through out-group hostility as much as in-group loyalty. This “negative partisanship” demonstrates that individuals’ partisan attachments drive affective and social divisions, with implications beyond electoral behavior, including interpersonal trust, marriage, and consumer choice. Scholars have also explored the mediating role of media environments, noting that selective exposure and partisan media consumption exacerbate identity-driven polarization (DuBosar et al., 2024; Stroud, 2011). More recent comparative research has expanded the scope beyond the American context. Studies in multiparty systems, such as Green et al. (2002) in Mexico, show that partisan identity is influenced by broader sociocultural cleavages.

Current study

In India, scholarship on partisan identity has underscored the centrality of sociocultural cleavages particularly caste, religion, and region in shaping party attachments. Early electoral studies emphasized the role of caste-based voting blocs, showing how caste identity often served as a heuristic for partisan loyalty (Yadav, 1999). Subsequent analyses highlighted the rise of religious polarization, especially the mobilization of Hindu identity by parties such as the *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP), which has reconfigured partisan allegiances across regions (Jaffrelot, 2003). Heath et al. (2015) demonstrated that Muslim voters often strategically support co-religious candidates when their chances of winning are credible, illustrating the interaction between identity and instrumental considerations.

More recent research has examined the transformation of partisan identity in the wake of India’s economic liberalization and digital communication revolution. Jaffrelot (2019) argued that partisan realignments in the 2019 general election reflected BJP’s ability to attract support from poorer voters, traditionally aligned with lower-caste parties. Scholars such as Banerjee et al. (2009) have also shown how providing voters with candidate-performance information can shift partisan loyalties away from entrenched identity-based patterns. With the rise of social media, studies highlight how WhatsApp and other platforms amplify partisan narratives and reinforce affective polarization along cultural and religious lines (Udupa, 2019).

Collectively, these contributions reveal that partisan identity in India is neither static nor solely tradition-bound; rather, it is an evolving construct shaped by the interplay of caste, religion, socioeconomic change, and digital media. The current study aimed to develop a qualitative understanding of partisanship across the eastern India (Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha)

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

A qualitative research design was employed to achieve the objective study. Participants were recruited through convenient and purposive sampling and were interviewed through a semi structured interview protocol. The entire procedure was reviewed and approved by the institutional Ethics Committee, of Doctor Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India before conducting the study.

Participants and their recruitment

The study comprised 23 adults from Bihar (10), Odisha (1) and West Bengal (12) who had previous voting experience of casting vote in either lok Sabha or Vidhan Sabha elections. They were recruited for the study through convenient sampling method and their informed consent was obtained with a promise to maintain confidentiality to ensure true response from respondents. Participants were adults with varied socioeconomic background with majority of them being urban dwellers. All participants were unmarried adults with majority of them being students. These demographic details provided a diverse yet focused participant pool, suitable for exploring the thematic dimensions of the study within a relatively homogeneous group.

Demographic Information of Participants

Table:1 Demographic Information of the Participants

Sl no.	Measure	Description	Frequencies	
			Number	Percentage
1.	Gender	Male	15	65.22%
		Female	8	34.78%
2.	Age	20	3	13.04%
		24	12	52.17%
		25	5	21.74%
		28	2	8.70%
		30	1	4.35%
3.	Educational Qualification	Intermediate	3	13.04%
		Graduate	15	65.22%
		Post-Graduate	5	21.74%
4.	Religion	Hindu	19	82.60%
		Muslim	2	8.70%
		Atheist	2	8.70%
5.	Socioeconomic status	Low	5	21.74%
		Medium	17	73.91%
		High	1	4.35%
6.	Residence	Rural	7	30.43%
		Semi-Urban	2	8.70%
		Urban	6	26.09%
		Metro	8	34.78%

7.	Family type	Nuclear	18	78.26%
		Joint	5	21.74%
8.	Occupation	Student	15	65.22%
		Self-employed	7	30.43%
		Unemployed	1	4.35%
9.	Marital Status	Unmarried	23	100%
10.	Times voted	1 time	5	21.74%
		2 times	16	69.57%
		3 times	2	8.70%
11.	Daily Internet Usage	2 hours	5	21.74%
		3 hours	15	65.22%
		6 hours	3	13.04%

Data Collection

Participants were recruited using convenient and purposive sampling and written consent was obtained from each participant for their involvement in the study. This ensured that the research was conducted ethically and confidentiality was maintained for unbiased response from each individual. Semi-structured questions were prepared to explore partisanship, with convenience to probe and follow up. Prior to the primary data collection, pilot interviews were undertaken to test and enhance the questions to solicit rich and informative responses.

Face-to-face interviews (in Hindi and English) were held in a quiet and comfortable place that promoted candid conversation which lasted for on an average 45 minutes. To preserve the utmost depth of participants' experiences, all interviews were audio-recorded with permission using phone recorder software and transcribed verbatim. Every transcript was methodically structured and given a specific identifier while ensuring complete confidentiality. The first phase of analysis entailed multiple readings of the transcripts to get used to the data and see the emerging themes. Data collection proceeded until saturation was achieved, such that no new themes appeared.

A codebook was employed to maintain detailed records of the interview process, including reflective notes on every interview and decisions made during data collection. These measures ensured a systematic and thorough approach to collecting rich qualitative data for thematic analysis. Reflexivity in this study was maintained by keeping a reflective journal to recognize and minimize researcher biases. Integrity of data collection was ensured through pilot testing of semi-structured interview questions. Thematic analysis was carried out, with peer debriefing and triangulation against literature validating the themes.

Interview Protocol

A semi structured interview protocol was created using inputs from literature and experts.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the initial stage verbatim transcription of the interviews were read multiple times which was complemented with note-taking to familiarize oneself with the data. After finishing the transcriptions, systematically coded the data to were used to reflect partisanship. These codes were sorted into broader themes, and respective excerpts were labelled under each theme. Themes were inspected and revised to capture the participants' authentic experiences in an

accurate manner. Subsequently, themes were named and defined explicitly following close reading of each in the context of partisanship. The last step was to prepare a detailed report, with examples that represented the meaning of each theme.

RESULT

After doing the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts four themes and several subthemes about the partisanship across Eastern India emerged which were: foundations of partisan identity, affective expressions of partisan identity, evaluative rationales for party support, and cues and triggers of partisan alignment aspirations. Each participant was allotted a code such as Bihar1, West Bengal 2, etc. to preserve their confidentiality and anonymity. Participant described their experiences regarding voting, elections and political parties. The detailed description of themes and subthemes are as follows: -

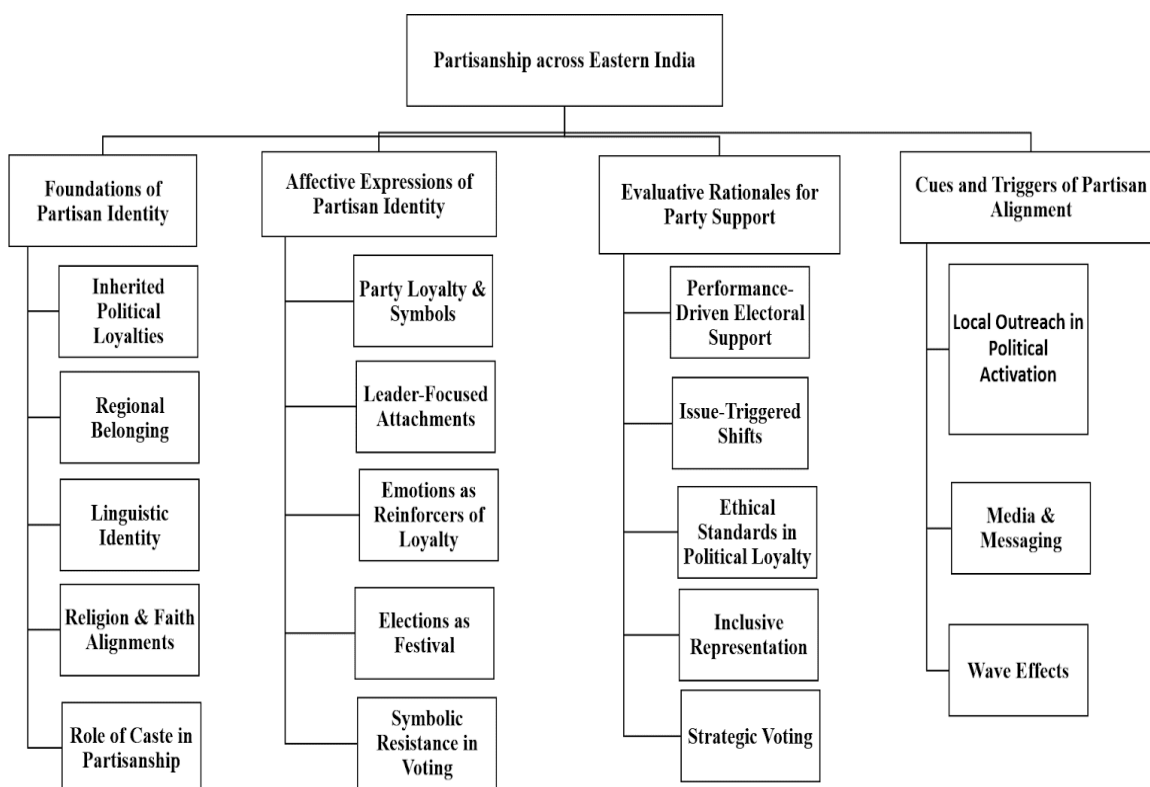


Figure: 1 Partisanship across eastern India

Theme 1: Foundations of Partisan Identity

This is the first theme elucidates the basic building blocks of partisan identity in Indian context. The participants reported that introduction to political parties started from an early age and had various factors which helped in creation and fostering of ideas about political parties. This theme has following 5 subthemes under it which are as follows: -

Subtheme 1: Inherited Political Loyalties

This subtheme describes the role family plays in creation and sustenance of views of political parties and eventually partisanship in an individual's life. Family experiences with a political party and a leader from a party often dictates early electoral choices done by an individual.

“I vote as per family’s wishes” (West Bengal 7)

“Baap-dada ke time se yahi party chali aa rahi hai” (Bihar 2)

Subtheme 2 Regional Belonging

This subtheme describes the role regional pride plays in determining the partisan preference of an individual. Participants reported that pride over the state's cultural identity and leader's role in upliftment of state's image are what one looks for before deciding political preference.

"Bihar ki ijat rakhne wali party chahiye" (Bihar 6)

"apni mitti ka samman kare wahi party theek hai" (West Bengal 8)

Subtheme 3: Linguistic Identity

This subtheme elucidates the fact that language also plays an important role in determining the partisan choice of an individual. Language just doesn't remain a medium of expression but an instrument of pride especially in non-Hindi speaker populous. The stance of political parties in promotion of language is seen as favorable by the voters reported participants.

"The party that uplifts bengali is good" (West Bengal 7)

"Odia bahsha ko aage badhaye" (Odisha 1)

Subtheme 4: Religion & Faith Alignments

This subtheme describes the role religious beliefs play in choice of political party and leader to support. Similar religious allegiance or overt display of religiosity or thought about same religion by a leader makes one evaluate the leader and its party in a favorable light by voters reported a participant.

"Dharam ki baat karne wali party ko vote padta hai" (West Bengal 9)

"Tyoharon me jo saath dikhe, use hi mante hain" (Bihar 8)

Subtheme 5: Role of Caste in Partisanship

This subtheme brings forward the caste angle in party preference and loyalty. A participant reported that caste identity plays a decisive role in leader and partisan choices especially in rural settings. However, few participants reported that caste as factor is being overlooked by them in personal electoral actions and preferences but simultaneously have thought that it is crucial for few voters.

"Ab jaati ka asar kam hai, kaam dekhte hain" (Bihar 4)

"Gaon me jaati ab bhi sunai deti hai" (West Bengal 6)

Theme 2: Affective Expressions of Partisan Identity

This theme elucidates the role affective component plays in determining partisan experience of an individual. Participants reported various emotion which is elicited by performance of political parties in electoral competition. Leader perception is also determinant of partisan preference and can build or break supporter for a political party. This theme has following 5 subthemes under it which are as follows: -

Subtheme 1: Party Loyalty & Symbols

This subtheme brings forward the importance party symbols have in the eyes of an ordinary voter. Participant reported that symbols have been the early identifier of political party and they elicit sense of belongingness when favorable experience exists.

"Party ka jhanda dekhkar hi vote karte hain" (Bihar 6)

"We go for same symbol everytime" (West Bengal 10)

Subthemes 2: Leader-Focused Attachments

This subtheme describes the perception building that is made by the actions of local leader of political parties. Favorable developmental actions by leader of political party tilts support towards that party. Often that support persists across various leader if party fields another

candidate in that area. This also works in another way where sometimes leader's good activities make one more loyal to person than the party.

"Chehra dekh kar bharosa banta hai" (Bihar 9)

"Charismatic leader brings the wave in election" (West Bengal 10)

Subtheme 3: Emotions as Reinforcers of Loyalty

This subtheme elucidates the variety of emotion that are elicited by electoral performance of parties. A participant reported that loss of party and candidate that he supported in election lead to feeling of sorrow persisting across sometime. Victory or losing of election are seen as personal achievement or loss reported few participants.

"When our party wins, celebrations are done at home!" (West Bengal 7)

"Haarne par dinbhar kharab rehta hai" (West Bengal 9)

Subtheme 4: Elections as Festival

This subtheme describes the perception election have in eyes of voters. A participant reported that during election season the atmosphere of village was like a festival where everyone enjoyed the canvassing and were excited to exercise their right of choosing their leader.

"Chunav loktantra ka parv hai" (Bihar 1)

"Gaon me chunav ek tyohar jaisa lagta hai." (West Bengal 8)

Subtheme 5: Symbolic Resistance in Voting

This highlights the actions which are result of voters' dissatisfaction with performance of current regime or leader. A participant reported that when faced with no leader good enough to choose, they resort to NOTA as an act of defiance to the system.

"I chose NOTA for showing dissatisfaction" (West Bengal 6)

"Virodh me dusri party chun li" (Bihar 10)

Theme 3: Evaluative Rationales for Party Support

This theme describes the cognitive effort that an individual employs to make the partisan choice which then ultimately leads to the electoral choices. Participants reported various parameters which helped them to evaluate previous actions of leaders and parties. This theme highlights the pragmatic side of individuals in the arena of political choices. This theme has following 5 subthemes under it which are as follows: -

Subtheme 1: Performance-Driven Electoral Support

This subtheme puts forward the tendency of voters of making electoral choices based on the past performance of leader and the party. Development-oriented work is something that we look for in a leader reported a participant. Few participants even said that if someone does not perform well in developmental sphere, they might even change their party preference.

"Jo kaam Karega, usi ko vote denge" (West Bengal 6)

"Kaam dikhe to party bhi badal denge" (Bihar 7)

Subtheme 2: Issue-Triggered Shifts

This subtheme describes tendency of individuals to switch their partisan allegiance based on unfavorable performance on infrastructure development, job opportunities, etc. Participants reported that they had certain expectation from their leaders and parties and if they fail on them, then voters change their preference in hope of them fulfilling their expectations.

"Rojgaar nahi mila, isliye party badli" (Bihar 2)

"Mehangai se tang aakar dusri taraf hog aye" (West Bengal 9)

Subtheme 3: Ethical Standards in Political Loyalty

This subtheme describes the need of honesty which voters display while choosing leaders in constituency. Participants reported that they want their candidate to a clean image with no allegation of corruption or any crime. However few participants were pragmatic enough to display wish of choosing the least moral ambiguous leader.

“do not like corrupt leader” (Odisha 1)

“Imandaari sabse jyada jaroori hai” (Bihar 5)

Subtheme 4: Inclusive Representation (Women & Youth)

This subtheme describes aspiration of voters to have leaders from different from normal prototypical leader. A participant reported that she would prefer a female candidate over a male candidate. Participants also reported their preference for educated leaders.

“Mahila neta ko mauka mile , tabhi bharosa hota hai” (Bihar 1)

“Educated leader chahiye” (West Bengal 5)

Subtheme 5: Strategic Voting

This subtheme highlights the nature of strategic voting which is practiced by voters. A participant reported that they look for winning candidate irrespective of partisan loyalties as they do not wish to ‘waste’ their vote. Participant also reported that they applied different cognition between state and central elections based on the need of the time.

“Jitne wale ko hi vote dete hain” (Bihar 3)

“Lok sabha me alag Vidhan sabha me alag vote dete hain” (West Bengal 12)

Theme 4: Cues and Triggers of Partisan Alignment

This theme focuses on how an individual in an instance can activate partisanship in required situation. The theme describes the factors that lead to realization of partisan identity by the individuals. This theme has following 3 subthemes under it which are as follows: -

Subtheme 1: Local Outreach in Political Activation

This subtheme describes the effect door to door campaigning, election rallies which are instrumental in bringing forth the sense of partisanship in individuals. Participants reported that local door to door campaign does have positive impact on electoral choices.

“Party wale ghar ghar aakar manate hain” (West Bengal 5)

“Gaon me samjhane aate hain,tabhi tay hota hai” (Bihar 3)

Subtheme 2: Media & Messaging

This subtheme discusses the role messaging through media plays in determining the partisan choice of an individual. Participants reported that social media has been an information source for getting news regarding the performance of political parties on developmental sphere.

“TV se neta chehra jana jata hai” (West Bengal 12)

“Whatsapp par party ka message roj aata hai” (West Bengal 7)

Subtheme 3: Wave Effects

The subtheme describes the phenomenon of wave which determines political party preference of an individual. Participant reported that during wave of support for a leader often issues get sidelined during the electoral participation.

“Lehar aa jaaye toh mudde piche reh jaate hain” (West Bengal 7)

“Charismatic leadership brings a wave” (Bihar 9)

DISCUSSION

The present study explored partisan identity and voting behavior among young adult voters in the East Zone of India, drawing on qualitative interviews that revealed the lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions of participants. Through thematic analysis, four overarching themes emerged: Foundations of Partisan Identity, Affective Expressions of Partisan Identity, Evaluative Rationales for Party Support, and Cues and Triggers of Partisan Alignment, each comprising subthemes that highlight the richness and complexity of how individuals construct, sustain, and negotiate their partisan attachments. This discussion situates these findings within the broader body of literature on partisanship, political psychology, and electoral behavior, comparing areas of convergence and divergence between the East Zone data and existing research.

The first theme, foundations of partisan identity, revealed that family traditions, regional pride, language, religion, and caste constitute important foundations of partisan identity. These findings align with the classic view of partisanship as a product of early socialization, most notably advanced by the Michigan School (Campbell et al., 1960), which emphasized the intergenerational transmission of party identification. The consistent references to '*ghar ki Parampara*' (family tradition) underscore that Indian partisanship is often rooted in familial influence, echoing similar observations in Indian political behavior literature (Heath, 2005; Yadav, 1999).

Regional and cultural pride as bases for partisan affiliation also reflect the salience of subnational identities in India. Scholarship on federal politics highlights that state-level identity markers such as Bengali culture or Odia language significantly shape political alignments. This resonates with the literature on "ethnic and linguistic voting" in multilingual societies (Horowitz, 1985), as voters often see parties as custodians of regional pride.

Interestingly, while religion was acknowledged as influential, participants simultaneously noted that caste had *declining* influence. This dual pattern supports scholarship suggesting that while caste politics has not disappeared, it is undergoing transformation, declining in salience relative to developmental concerns, but still mobilized in rural or localized settings (Chandra, 2004; Jaffrelot, 2003). Thus, the East Zone findings contribute to an emerging perspective that Indian partisanship is increasingly hybrid, rooted in socio-cultural traditions but shifting towards other evaluative bases.

The second theme, expressive dimensions of partisanship, described loyalty, emotional ties, charisma, and symbolism in their accounts of partisanship. This aligns with theories that view partisanship not merely as a rational calculation, but as an affective identity (Green et al., 2002). Emotional expressions such as joy at a party's victory or sadness at its loss illustrate what Huddy et al. (2015) call the "expressive component" of partisanship, where political attachment is akin to social identity.

The role of party symbols, flags, election symbols, and colors was pronounced, reinforcing the idea that partisanship is both symbolic and performative. In India, where literacy rates vary, symbols often become the cognitive shorthand for loyalty.

Charismatic leadership was another expressive subtheme, consistent with Weberian notions of charismatic authority (Weber & Roth, 1978) and its influence in South Asian politics. The "wave politics" described in the interviews reflects what Khosla (2020) calls "leader-centered populism," where voters rally around strong personalities.

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Finally, the notion of elections as a festival of democracy resonates with cultural accounts of Indian elections as collective, celebratory rituals (M. Banerjee, 2017). The expressive framing of partisanship in this study underscores its embeddedness in social meaning, pride, and affect supporting literature that critiques purely instrumental models of voter choice.

In the third theme evaluative rationales for party support respondents frequently stressed performance, delivery, and accountability as criteria for supporting or abandoning a party. This reflects a pragmatic, evaluative dimension to partisanship that resonates with Fiorina (1981) theory of retrospective voting, where voters assess governments based on performance. Complaints about employment, inflation, healthcare, and infrastructure align with literature that development issues increasingly shape Indian electoral politics (Suri, 2002).

The emphasis on anti-corruption further strengthens this view, echoing studies of voter backlash against perceived corrupt regimes in India (Vaishnav, 2017). The East Zone narratives also included calls for greater representation of women and youth, aligning with global literature on inclusivity reshaping partisanship (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

Strategic voting was also present: switching between national and regional parties, or differentiating between Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha choices. This reflects Kailash & Arora (2016)'s argument that India's multi-level federal system encourages strategic partisan alignment, where voters calibrate their identities based on the level of contest. Thus, instrumental partisanship in East Zone findings confirms that while expressive attachment is strong, voters remain willing to punish parties when governance performance lags.

The findings of theme four cues and triggers of partisan alignment also show how partisan identity is activated in context through campaigns, media, family discussions, and the electoral environment. Respondents cited door-to-door canvassing, WhatsApp groups, and TV debates as influential, underscoring the importance of political communication in shaping partisan salience. This aligns with selective exposure literature (DuBosar et al., 2024; Stroud, 2011) which shows how partisan identity is reinforced by partisan media ecosystems.

The "wave effects" triggered by charismatic leaders illustrate how contextual surges can temporarily override long-term loyalties, confirming theories of identity activation (Huddy et al., 2015).

Thus, East Zone findings affirm that partisan identity is not static it is continuously cued, reinforced, or contested in the lived context of election campaigns, social media, and peer/family environments.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the East Zone data contribute to a nuanced understanding of partisan identity. They confirm classical insights about familial socialization, cultural identity, and affective attachment, but also highlight the growing importance of performance evaluation, inclusivity, and contextual activation through media and campaigns. The findings situate Indian partisanship as both deeply rooted and dynamically adaptive, grounded in history and identity, yet responsive to governance, communication, and aspirations. By bridging expressive and instrumental dimensions, the East Zone study affirms the hybrid character of partisan identity.

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Conflict of Interest

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