Why the Poor Vote in India: "If I Don't Vote, I Am Dead to the State"

Amit Ahuja · Pradeep Chhibber

Abstract Our empirical research in India shows the poor and the non-poor report different motivations for voting. The poor say they turn out to vote because it is their right while the non-poor report they vote because they expect material benefits from the state, some kind of access to the state, or because voting is their civic duty. We attribute the different reasons for voting offered by the poor and non-poor to their different relationships with the state. Unlike the non-poor, the poor mostly report the state mistreats or ignores them yet makes every effort on Election Day to ensure they are treated equally. The recognition the state grants to the poor on Election Day leads them to view voting as a valued right, one that gives them a rare chance to associate with those who govern as equals. The evidence in this paper was drawn from 30 focus groups with a total of 445 participants and 150 open-ended interviews conducted across Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh and three state and national-level surveys.

Keywords Vote · Participation · Poor · State · Elections · Rights · Patronage · Duty · India

Introduction

As we traveled by rickshaw to an election meeting at a candidate's home in a poor district of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the rickshaw puller asked us why we were going. We introduced ourselves as researchers and told him of our interest in voting, and he stated, without prompting, "Voting is important. If I don't vote, I am dead to the state."

We were quite struck by this man's remark. As a result, we asked the people at the election meeting why they chose to vote instead of staying at home on Election Day.

A. Ahuja (✉)
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA
e-mail: aahuja@polsci.ucsb.edu

P. Chhibber
University of California, Berkeley, USA
e-mail: Chhibber@berkeley.edu

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What we heard from these relatively well-off people was consistent with expectations established by the literature: that they voted either because of the benefits that might accrue to them if a politician they favored was elected or because they viewed voting as their civic duty.

As we left the district, we wondered if what we had heard that day from the rickshaw puller was indicative of a more general phenomenon. Had he simply expressed a peculiar view held by one poor citizen in a poor state? Or did the poor systematically view the act of voting in a way that was different from what we had come to expect among those who are better off?

In a series of focus groups and open-ended interviews that we conducted across a variety of demographic categories in the three Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, we found what appeared to be a pattern, with the poor using the language of rights to explain their participation in elections while the comparatively well-to-do explained their own participation in terms of personal benefits or civic duty. In these focus groups and interviews, it also emerged that the poor perceived their relationship to the state in terms very different from the terms that applied to people who were not poor. The poor pointed either to the state's sheer disregard for them or to its capricious treatment of them. But disregard and capriciousness were not the reported experience of people from other segments of Indian society, who were able to access the various arms of the state to address their needs. In this paper, we argue that the state's capricious, practically disrespectful treatment of the poor is what leads them to link the language of rights to the decision to turn out to vote.

Why Do the Poor Go to Vote?

Scholarly treatments of Indian democracy observe that the poor turn out to vote in large numbers (Yadav 1996, 1999, 2004; Alam 2004; Kumar 2009) and that they value democracy (Krishna 2008). The turnout rate among the poor is almost as high as for those who are either middle class or rich. A detailed study of voter participation reported for the 2009 national elections shows that voter participation rates do not seem to vary by income status at all. According to income-based breakdown of turnout for the 2009 national election as reported by Kumar (2009), there was no difference in the turnout among the poor, the middle classes, and the wealthy. Recent studies report similar findings from Africa and Latin America (Bratton 2008; Booth & Seligson 2008). The poor queue up for long hours at the polling booths, sometimes in adverse weather conditions. On Election Day, they wear clean or new clothes and may forgo daily wages to go to vote.

Yet why the poor go to vote in India remains puzzling. This is for three reasons. First, the state that organizes the elections and the governments created by these elections are known to neglect the interests of the poor and treat them disrespectfully as compared to other income groups, but this does not seem to make the poor less enthusiastic voters.[1]

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[1] Assessments of the Indian state have often pointed to its general failure to improve the conditions of the poor and the very poor. Legions of studies (see, for example, Bardhan 1984, 2010; Kohli 1989; Weiner 1991; Dreze and Sen 1996; Dube 1998; Mehta 2003; and Varshney 2005) have described how the state has failed those most in need.

Second, empirical confirmation that would identify which motivation among the well-established ones in the literature on participation (for example, interest and civic duty) actually takes the poor in India to the polling booth has been missing so far. No study has systematically evaluated the motivations in order to identify the presence or absence of a dominant motivation. Third, and on a related note, thus far we do not know the differences in motivations for voting of the poor compared with those who are endowed with more economic resources.

In this paper, we argue that the poor see the act of voting as a right. The non-poor, by contrast, vote either to gain some benefit or as fulfilling a duty. This difference, we claim, is linked to the different relationship of the state to the poor and the non-poor. The poor face a capricious state that mostly ignores or mistreats them except on Election Day, whereas the non-poor do have access to the state and are more likely to perceive the state as working with them. The arbitrariness of the state leads the poor to adopt the language of rights. The theoretical contribution of this paper is that a citizen's relationship to the state is essential to why an individual goes to vote. This argument contrasts with other arguments in contemporary political science that link voting either to self-interest or to a sense of civic duty.

Data and Methodology

To answer why the poor go to vote, we adopted a multimethod approach, relying on two kinds of evidence to substantiate our arguments: data gathered from the afore-mentioned interviews and focus group discussions and survey data used to supplement those findings. The survey evidence was drawn from the National Election Study conducted after the 2004 national elections (27,189 respondents); the State of the Nation survey conducted by Lokniti in 2009 (14,000 respondents); and a citizen survey carried out in Tamil Nadu in 2006, which explicitly asked respondents why they had voted (4,200 respondents).[2] Our study also relied on more detailed qualitative evidence obtained through focus groups and one-to-one interviews. In the focus groups, there were 180 poor and 265 non-poor participants. In addition to the focus groups, we carried out detailed interviews with 60 poor respondents and 90 respondents from other income segments in the same localities as the focus group discussions. We used an income-based criterion to classify the survey and interview respondents and the focus group participants as poor or non-poor. Using the same classification as the surveys conducted by Lokniti, we classified anyone with an income of less than Rs 2,000 per month as poor.

Organization of the Paper

This paper is divided into five parts. In the first part, we provide data from the focus groups and in-depth interviews to show that reported motivations for voting do differ between the poor and the well-to-do. The reasons that the wealthier participants in the

focus groups and interviews offered for voting can be explained by contemporary scholarship, but the political science literature cannot offer a full accounting for why the poor turn out to vote. In the first part of the paper, we establish that the poor, in using the language of rights to explain their voting behavior, are influenced by their relationship to the state. In the second part of the paper, we discuss why the current literature is unable to explain the reasons the poor provide for voting and develop our argument in fuller detail. In the third part, we turn our attention to the relationship between the state and the poor, and between the state and comparatively well-to-do sections of Indian society. We show that economic status makes a qualitative difference to how the state is experienced by citizens. The poor face what we call a "capricious" state, a state whose treatment of the poor is largely arbitrary, ad hoc, and often disrespectful. In the fourth part, we argue that elections mark a departure from this routine. On Election Day, the Indian state takes extraordinary measures to include all citizens equally and fairly, giving the poor a chance to affirm their equal citizenship. In the fifth part of the paper, we provide some quantitative evidence to demonstrate that poor citizens who do not feel represented are far more likely to use the language of rights in explaining why they vote. We conclude the paper with a few caveats.

Motivations for Voting

Understanding why citizens turn out to vote is a long-standing preoccupation of political science. Where voting in India is concerned, we gathered data by putting the question directly to Indian citizens. As mentioned, we used focus groups and open-ended interviews to determine what voters thought about the act of voting. Focus groups were especially helpful, since we were strangers and thus were not automatically trusted by the respondents in the localities we visited. The poor Indian respondents with whom we came in contact, even when we presented them with documentation clearly outlining our project's aims and our institutional affiliation, worried about whom they might be speaking to, and they often asked which political party or governmental department we were from. Interacting in a group enabled us to reassure our respondents and allowed them to speak with us with more confidence. Use of a focus group (as compared to something like participant observation) also allowed the replication of questions across different areas to enable some generalizability.

Each of the 30 focus groups had 12–15 participants, and 465 people participated in the discussions. There were 150 open-ended interviews conducted as follow-ups. These discussions were held across middle-class, poor, and wealthy localities in villages, small towns, and big cities. Within an electoral district, the localities and neighborhoods were randomly selected. Each focus group was constituted of individuals of similar class and caste background.[3] Focus group participants and

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[3] First, we randomly selected localities from the list of polling booths used by the electoral commission. Next, we confirmed the income and caste profiles of localities and neighborhoods through multiple sources, all independent of one another. When a locality fitted our required profile, we selected it. For neighborhood and locality selection, our income parameters included upper, middle, and lower-income households; and for caste, our parameters included households from the upper, backward (or intermediate), and ex-untouchable castes. In rural and urban settings, we conducted focus groups in nine types of neighborhoods.

interview subjects in a locality were selected randomly. Using the voter list for a particular locality, we picked every sixth individual for participation in the focus group. When occasionally the individual did not fit our income or caste parameter, or if the individual was not available, or if our request for participation was turned down, we kept going down the list. Since we had deliberately picked large localities to work in, we were able to deal with the problem of low response rates when it arose.

The same method was used for the follow up one-to-one interviews. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in the appropriate local language. In some urban and rural localities, the focus groups were conducted with men and women separately. Each meeting lasted 1.5–2 hours.

The fieldwork was conducted across 11 districts in three large Indian states: Uttar Pradesh in the north, Maharashtra in the west, and Tamil Nadu in the south.[4] These three states were chosen to control for variance in the general income levels of the states,[5] for the historical presence or absence of subaltern movements,[6] and for the nature of party competition and voter mobilization.[7]

Do focus groups privilege group opinion over individual opinion, and how representative are the opinions that can sometimes dominate a discussion? Our field observations tell us that in rural India, individuals still gather political information through group discussions. However, since the open-ended interviews conducted in each locality to supplement the focus group discussions and the surveys yield similar opinions, we have confidence that the discussions in the focus groups were not contaminated by group opinion.

We began the discussion in each focus group by asking voters about the needs and demands in their locality as well as in the electoral district. We then asked them about how these needs were met—what were the roles of party workers, elected representatives, and bureaucrats? Finally, we asked the respondents why they chose to vote in the recent election.

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[4] The focus groups and follow-up interviews were conducted in the following districts: Meerut, Gautam Budhnagar, and Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh; Sangli, Vardha, Mumbai, and Nagpur in Maharashtra; and Madurai, Chennai, and Chidambram in Tamil Nadu.

[5] These three large Indian states have very different income levels. Per capita income is highest in Maharashtra, among the lowest in Uttar Pradesh, and average in Tamil Nadu. To be specific, in 2002–2003 in India, per capita income at constant prices was Rs. 11,013 per annum; per capita income was Rs. 15,580 in Maharashtra, Rs. 5,603 in Uttar Pradesh, and Rs. 12,696 in Tamil Nadu. Only Goa's per capita income was higher than Maharashtra's (see sampark.chd.nic.in/images/statistics/SDP2005R6.pdf).

[6] Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have been home to movements demanding social equality, but similar movements have not taken hold in Uttar Pradesh. In Tamil Nadu, where the Dravidian movement existed through the middle half of the twentieth century and where a Dravidian party finally came to power in 1967, there has been a history of mobilization among the marginalized. In Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, the electoral mobilization of the marginalized and the poor is a recent phenomenon (Chandra 2004). We did not conduct research in West Bengal, where a leftist party focusing its attention on the rural poor has been in power since 1967. Banerjee (2007) has found independently that the poor vote for reasons that echo some of our findings, although she sees voting as akin to the performance of a religious ritual.

[7] These three states also differ on the dimensions of interparty competition and history of voter mobilization. Uttar Pradesh is now characterized by multiparty competition, with each of the three major parties representing a social/caste bloc. In Maharashtra, electoral competition is largely between the centrist Congress and its splinter parties and two parties on the right, whereas in Tamil Nadu, at least until the last elections, two regional parties have competed to control the state legislature.

How Do the Poor Explain Voting?

In the focus groups, when we asked the poor why they had turned out to vote, they often emphasized the same motivation: "It is our right." In fact, some respondents even found the question offensive: Who were we to question their right to vote? As one poor villager in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, put it, "I *am* because I vote on Election Day. Otherwise, what is my stature in this society?" Many said that Election Day is the one day when they matter. Only during election campaigns, they said, do party workers and politicians come to *them*, seeking them out. Another participant said, "An election is the one event which ties us to the government. Politicians, people like you, journalists—everyone comes looking for us. If we did not vote, there would be no elections, and no one would know of our existence."

   In the course of the discussions, we also presented poor voters with the following question: "What if nothing changes over the next two elections, in terms of your material conditions—will you continue to vote?" In 58 % of the focus groups and among 45 % of the interview subjects, the answer was an unequivocal yes. These voters said that their votes could change the government, and that while the new one might not be any better than the one that had been voted out, they would be able to claim the change. "If the government does not work, we will vote for someone else," said one focus group participant in Tamil Nadu. An interview subject in Maharashtra echoed the sentiment by pointing out that, "The system may not work for us, but I can vote. It is still 'Lokshahi'—rule by the people, not 'Rajshahi'—king's rule." Yet another interview subject in Uttar Pradesh delighted in the fact that because of her, politicians could lose elections. "If people like me do not vote for the leaders, they can lose the election!" Voting, as the focus group discussion and interview responses suggests, is valued as a right by the poor for two distinct reasons. First, the act of voting recognizes the poor as citizens in the eyes of the state and those who run it. Second, and on a related note, it also assigns them a momentary parity with the rulers by empowering the poor to reject or elect their political masters.

Why Do the Non-poor Turn Out to Vote?

The non-poor in the focus groups did not emphasize their right to vote to the same extent as the poor. Instead, they reported the possibility of political gains from knowing party representatives and elected politicians. The patronage networks of the middle and lower middle classes were varied.[8] Only when voters were proximate to politicians did these beneficiaries of the state muster enthusiasm for voting.[9]

   Other non-poor respondents said that they turned out to vote because they saw it as their duty. Many among the non-poor did have partisan preferences but when

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[8] In coding our data, we took the broadest possible view with respect to defining relationships of patronage and exchange: that is, expected or actual benefits could accrue from interpersonal or community ties, or by means of public policy. We also used a broad classification in defining a community, which could comprise an ethnic, a linguistic, a religious, or a class group and could also mean a locality, a village, a city, an electoral district, or a region.

[9] There are party workers in poor localities, but these workers exercise less influence in their respective parties than do party workers in more affluent localities. Poor respondents also regularly lamented the fact that they did not know prominent politicians or government functionaries in their districts.

questioned further, they often said that if the favored parties or politicians did not win, these political losses were not expected to have a substantial impact on their lives. They said that they would like more people to turn out to vote because "it is everyone's democratic duty" and it "should not be taken lightly."

A focus group participant in the city of Nagpur said, "I vote because everyone in my family has always voted. My grandfather instilled that it is an important responsibility." An interview subject in rural Tamil Nadu said, "It is the one thing which all of India does together. Voting is our national duty." Another said, "We must vote, otherwise we have no moral right to protest government policies." The focus group and interview responses revealed a range of perceptions on how voting was viewed as a civic duty that all good citizens should fulfill. Some voted out of a sense of responsibility or national duty, while for others elections were a special moment when citizens got the opportunity to participate in a large civic exercise. But for these individuals, the act of voting was not a claim to equal citizenship or the exercising of a valued right. It was also not a part of an exchange relationship with representatives or political parties.

Figures 1 and 2 display the extent to which poor and non-poor participants in the focus groups, and poor and non-poor subjects in the one-to-one interviews, used the language of rights or reported other motivations for turning out to vote. The histograms represent the percentages of the focus group discussions in which the language of rights was used, or in which other motivations were reported. For a particular focus group to be coded for a particular response, that response had to be used by at least one third of the participants in that discussion. Given multiple opinions in a focus group, it could sometimes be coded for multiple responses. For example, sometimes the language of rights was used in the same focus group in which participants reported other motivations for voting. The figures take such overlap into account. There was much less overlap in responses in the one-to-one interviews that supplemented the focus group discussions. Moreover, not all poor citizens saw voting as a right; the benefits of patronage and the carrying out of a civic duty were also reported as motivations among citizens in this group. Similarly, some of the non-poor citizens used the language of rights.

In about 67 % of the focus groups conducted in poor localities, voting was cited as a right; in the one-to-one interviews, 48 % of the poor interview subjects used the language of rights.[10] By sharp contrast, in 83 % of the focus groups conducted in middle- and upper-income localities, other motivations, such as the exchange of benefits or the carrying out of one's civic duty, were pointed to as motivations for turning out to vote; in the one-to-one interviews, about 67 % of the interview subjects in middle- and upper-income localities reported motivations other than exercising the right to vote. In Fig. 1, assertion of their rights was the dominant motivation among the poor. It is important to remember that the category of other motivations is a sum of interest-based and civic duty-based motivations.

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[10] Ethnographic work by Banerjee (2007) in two villages of communist party governed West Bengal also reports the use of the language of rights by the poor. On the whole though, assertion of a right or citizen affirmation has so far remained an underreported motivation for voting in the literature on participation.

Fig. 1 Use of rights and other
motivations in interviews

**Use of Rights and Other Motivations in Interviews**
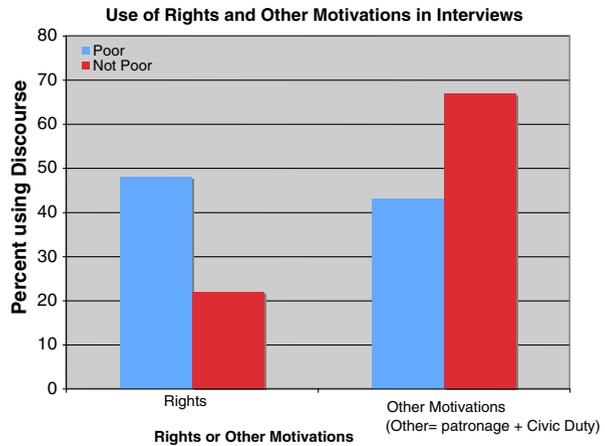
Why Do Citizens Vote?

Citizens turn out to vote for one of two principal reasons: either self-interest or a sense of civic duty. It is argued that during adolescence, citizens develop a sense of civic duty regarding the act of voting, since this period of their lives is when they internalize norms of civic behavior that remain with them throughout adulthood (Campbell 2006). Recent literature based on innovative experiments has highlighted the importance of peer pressure as a mechanism for boosting voter turnout (Gerber, Green, and Lerimer 2008). Peer pressure reinforces the norm of civic duty, as individuals fear the violation of some social norm if they shirk voting.

Interest-based motivations for voting have been understood to have two variants, with voting seen as determined either by the resources a citizen possesses for participation and engagement in politics or by the processes through which a voter participates in elections. For example, a citizen's ordinary nonpolitical activities, such as involvement in education and engagement in civic associations, can lead to the

Fig. 2 Use of rights and other
motivations in focus groups

Use of Rights and Other Motivations in Focus Groups
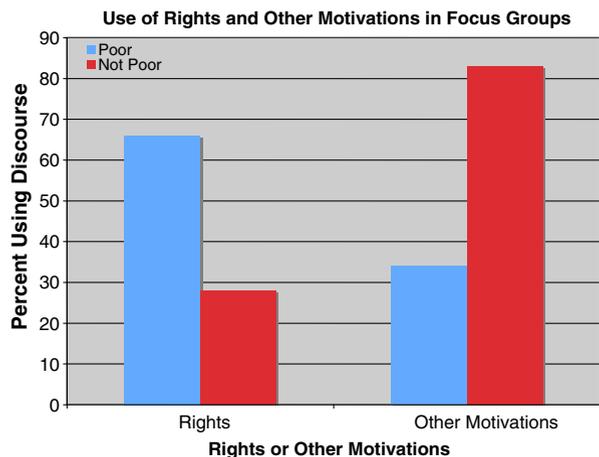
development of skills that are politically relevant and can therefore facilitate the citizen's greater political participation (Brad yet al. 1995). Similar reasons are provided for immigrant voting behavior in the USA (Bass and Casper 2001; Bueker 2005; Marrow 2005; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001). Voting can also be viewed as a form of exchange between the voter on the one hand and the political representative or party on the other, with the voter or client showing up to vote for an intermediary or a patron and in return expecting access to state resources (Chandra 2004; Stokes 2005; Posner 2005; Wilkinson 2007).[11]

Our empirical research finds support for both the civic duty and the interest-based motivations among the non-poor. The poor, however, offered neither civic duty nor interest-based reasons for why they went to the polls. The poor instead, as we observed earlier, stressed voting as a right.[12] How can we account for the poor using the language of rights and the non-poor relying on notions of civic duty and interests when they go to vote? We argue that these differences are attributable to the different relationship between the poor, the non-poor, and the state.[13]

We argue that fundamental to political participation is the relationship between the citizen and the state. If individuals stand in different relationships to the state, they will offer varying reasons for why they vote. On most days, except for the period leading up to an election and on Election Day itself, the poor have fewer contacts with the state than the non-poor. They are also confronted with a state and state agents whose behavior toward them consists either of actively ignoring them or of mistreating them. To the poor, the state is a capricious actor that, while granting them many rights, is able to guarantee only a few. But on Election Day, the poor—who are generally subject to the arbitrary power of the state—have a vote just like everyone else, a vote that the state respects. And, as we have seen, the poor voters we talked with used the language of rights in explaining their reasons for voting. The poor, facing an arbitrary state, realize that their civil rights are dependent on the goodwill of the state, and hence the poor exert their agency where they can, and do so through the language of rights.[14] According to the poor, the act of voting dignifies them as citizens. It also allows them to hold the arbitrary state to account.

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[11] Ethnic, racial, and religious identities, because of their relative permanence, emerge as an effective organizing principle for durable voter coalitions (Wilkinson 2007; Jha et al. 2005; Fearon 1999). Since voters are convinced that voting their coethnics into office offers them the best chance of accessing state resources, they show up on Election Day to vote for coethnic patrons (Horowitz 1985; Chandra 2004; Posner 2005). Scholars working in Latin America have found that parties can motivate turnout by targeting swing voters (Stokes 2005) or core supporters (Nichter 2008) with direct cash transfers before elections.

[12] In the literature on voting, the benefits supposedly deriving from the decision to vote are placed in one of two categories: material or expressive. If that classification is strictly observed, then two different motives for voting that are discussed here—voting to exercise one's right, and voting to discharge one's civic duty—would be viewed as similar, since both decisions would be seen as furnishing expressive benefits. As this paper demonstrates, however, these two motivations for voting are rooted in very different contexts. An equivalence in the *benefits* derived from the two types of decision may be observed, but the two motivations remain quite distinct.

[13] Explanations based on clientelism and patronage focus more on party–voter relations rather than state–voter relations.

[14] In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott (1985) shows that the poor and the marginalized in Malaysian villages do not give in to subjugation. In the absence of opportunity, they resort to passive or hidden forms of resistance against the dominant classes. Subscribing to a framework grounded in religious ideas as well as in traditional norms of reciprocity, they hold the dominant classes accountable for their behavior.

For the non-poor, the state is far less of an arbitrary actor. Their civil rights are not dependent on the goodwill of the politicians and bureaucrats, and hence they are far less likely to stress their rights vis-à-vis the state. This focus on the state harkens to research by Gaventa (1980) and Piven and Cloward (1997), which claims that participation by the disadvantaged is related to political institutions and how political processes might exclude them.

The argument made in this paper is broadly consistent with the observations made by Holston (2008a, b, 2011) and Somers (1994, 2008). A capricious state leaves the poor in India in circumstances similar to those experienced by slum dwellers in Brazil, as described vividly by Holston, or those left abandoned after Hurricane Katrina, as described by Somers. The poor need special pleading to claim their rights. This exacerbates their struggle as "it always puts them on the defensive, forces them to find the right person to intercede on their behalf, renders uncertain their dignity and respect, and makes them acknowledge their inferiority" (Holston 2011, 345). The exercise of their rights then depends on "the discretion, not the duty, of someone in a position of power" and "converts rights into privileges, in the sense that it becomes a privilege to obtain what is by law a right" (ibid.). Elections invert the transformation of rights into privileges that characterize everyday life by making the right to vote independent of the discretion of those in power. Elections help citizens conceive "their citizenship as a means to establish a common ground…(and creates) sense that their status as citizen has an unconditional, equal worth in rights, one not based on individual market value or on any other status" (Holston 2011, 349), thereby making rights more egalitarian. It is only elections (Somers 2008) that provide the poor membership in a political community, as on that day the poor are recognized by others as a moral equal.

The use of the language of rights by the poor to explain their motivation for voting should not be surprising in the light of the scholarship on how the poor exert their agency in their relationship with the state. Faced with arbitrariness, the poor—in moments of opportunity, this literature tells us—will assert themselves. O'Brien and Li (2006), describing what they call "rightful resistance," point out that in China as well, poor citizens try to hold the state accountable by deploying the rhetoric of the state whenever they get the chance, using the language of the very rights that the state says the poor have. Likewise, in El Salvador, Wood (2003) found close to one third of her respondents among a group of poor peasants admitted that they supported the insurgency against the state in order to defy the state's violence, exert their own historical agency, and participate in building God's kingdom.

Citizens' Relationship to the Indian State

Why did different groups cite varying motivations for going to the polls? In a democratic system, all citizens should have a similar experience of the state. They should be able to expect the state to be attentive to their concerns, should have access to the state, and should expect to be treated with respect by the state when they approach its institutions. Our findings, however, are that the poor citizens we met and interviewed in India systematically reported across multiple indicators an experience of the state that was different from the experience of better-off citizens.

   Most of the poor subjects in the one-to-one interviews and most of the poor participants in the focus groups reported frequently being treated with disrespect and being summarily dismissed when they interacted with the state. One poor citizen, capturing the reality of the link between social status and treatment by the state, said, "When big people enter a government office, the official stands up. When poor people go in, no one even asks them to sit." The poor also complained of intimidation and coercion at the hands of the state's functionaries. Ideally, the poor, as citizens of a democratic state, should enjoy equal access to state services. Nevertheless, according to the poor people with whom we spoke, they had no control over the teachers in their schools; they were openly intimidated in police stations; they faced rampant neglect in health centers; and, in district offices, their petitions got put on the back burner. In other words, they reported that the state had failed them on many counts.[15] One respondent offered this view quite succinctly: "No one listens, no one is interested. I stand there for hours on end, give up my daily wage, but get only five minutes of their time, and sometimes not even that. How does one keep doing it? *Gareeb admi ki kaun parva kartha hai?* Who cares about the poor man?"[16] In some focus group discussions, these participants were very forthright in expressing their anger: "The government is shameless"; "We are the forgotten people."[17] According to the Indian government's own estimates, less than half of all the resources allocated to the poor

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[15] The record of public service delivery varies across Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra provide a wider set of services than Uttar Pradesh, and yet, in the evidence drawn from focus group discussions and interviews, we do not observe any difference in how the poor described their relationship with the state. We do however find that the poor complain about a larger set of issues in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra than Uttar Pradesh. But this probably reflects the "endowment effect": citizen expectations of the state are informed by the initial endowment of state provisions (Sunstein 1993). Even when the state provides more services, its relationship with the poor still remains capricious, and irrespective of whichever state they live in, the poor perceive their treatment by the state as arbitrary and neglectful.

[16] Corbridge et al. (2005) confirm this finding quite succinctly, saying that the poor see the state when the state wants to see them.

[17] The poor certainly face the capriciousness of the state in urban areas, but they are frequently also treated with indifference in rural areas. In urban areas, the residential situation of the poor is precarious; tied to this problem are issues of access to the public distribution system and other livelihood issues. The poor are under constant threat of having their settlements uprooted and losing their recognition as inhabitants of the city. The primary fear of the poor in urban areas is that unless they have political protection, politicians and city administrators can easily dispense with their settlements, and their hutments can be destroyed. The residents of slums in cities like Delhi and Mumbai, where there is a large premium on land, often made this connection with remarks like "We have to make ourselves count; otherwise, we will be evicted" or "You think the parties are interested in our welfare? If we are very fortunate, our slum will be legalized." In rural areas, both farm and nonfarm work pay close to the minimum wage. In many instances, however, the state's incomplete implementation of the land-redistribution program has left the poor with land entitlements but without control over the actual holdings. The state has generally failed to intervene on their behalf to ensure the transfer of land. It has also failed to provide them with reliable access to public goods like clean drinking water, electricity, schooling, and health care. Nevertheless, the poor citizens we spoke with still expected the state to deliver public goods. For the most part, however, access to the state and to jobs with the state remained out of their reach. For a large section of these poor citizens, issues of livelihood and security were central to their lives, and many said that they would offer bribes to state officials and become clients of the state if they had the resources to do so. They also said that they seldom counted with the state, and that the state was not interested in addressing their issues. When they did make contact with the state for the redress of individual as well as collective problems, these interactions were fraught with hurdles.

ever reach the people for whom they are intended, and most of the resources that go astray do so within the institutions of the state itself.[18]

But why do the poor, who are marginalized by the state, continue to hold expectations of the state when the state regularly disappoints them? According to Chandhoke (2005), the preeminence of the state in the public imagination is an outcome of state practice and its rhetoric. The Indian state controls a substantial portion of national resources and public service delivery systems. Furthermore, the rhetoric of the Indian state has promised much to Indian citizens, including jobs, housing, health care, the eradication of poverty, food subsidies, and sanitation facilities. But even as the state has fallen short on these commitments, over a period of 60 years, it has become implanted in the public imagination as the arbiter of the common good. Moreover, the state's programs, its administrative structure, and its politicization through parties and movements have all contributed to this process.

Non-poor citizens who are better connected also depend on state support, but in different ways. Some of these better-connected citizens do not possess the resources to opt out of the system of state-supplied goods and services, but others do. Those who depend on state support to maintain their current socioeconomic status and prospects for mobility look for a direct relationship with the state. During the focus group discussions and interviews, people in this group said that knowing important party workers and politicians is useful. Access to the police, the courts, credit, and government jobs is often negotiated through state functionaries and politicians. Having patrons matters to members of this group (Mitra 1992, 2001; Mitra and Singh 1999). The government may intimidate them, but they are networked within it. Another segment of the non-poor has a different relationship with the state. These citizens have the resources to access state goods and services. They are also directly or indirectly networked with the upper echelons of the state. The press and media services give wide coverage to this group's concerns, and people in this group utilize their access to the judiciary. If this group is not satisfied with the quality or the quantum of public goods and services, it has the resources to exit the system and purchase these goods and services on the open market. This group is critical of the state but not intimidated by it. Members of this group turn to the state when they need to, but otherwise they can do without the state.

In the focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews, people in the better-connected non-poor groups did not report being disrespected by state officials. For these citizens, the government was at times a disappointment and at worst an irritant. They did not think that the government ignored their concerns or their issues, but they did say that the state failed to deliver goods and services adequately. This outlook contrasted sharply with that of the poor, who almost always expressed fear of the state and feelings of helplessness in the face of its disrespectful treatment.

Since the poor and the non-poor have a different relationship with the state, their responses to survey questions about their contact with the state could be expected to reflect that difference. Therefore, we probed the extent of personal contact that Indian citizens have with state functionaries. More specifically, we wanted to establish whether poor citizens, in keeping with what was suggested by our findings in the

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[18] Ample evidence for this claim has been provided by reports of the Planning Commission and the Central Vigilance Commission, both governmental bodies.

focus groups and interviews, have fewer connections with the state, both with politicians and with bureaucrats. To do so, we examined data from the 2009 State of Nation survey, which asked respondents two questions about their contact with the state: whether (1) they or (2) someone in their family knew a politician or a bureaucrat who could help them out. We discovered that poor citizens were far less likely than those in other groups to know a politician or a bureaucrat. Only 11 % of poor respondents to the 2009 survey knew a politician, compared to 22 % of the respondents belonging to middle- and upper-income group; among the caste groups, the differences were not so large (see Fig. 3). In Fig. 3, there is a difference between the responses of the upper castes and scheduled castes/scheduled tribes; however, the difference between the poor and the non-poor is much larger than between upper castes and scheduled castes/scheduled tribes. Figure 4 shows which social groups were more likely to know a bureaucrat. Once again, the poor were far less likely to know a bureaucrat (8 %), compared to the middle- and upper-income group (23 %); and, again, the differences among the caste groups were not as salient. As Fig. 5 shows, the poor were also less likely to contact either a politician or a bureaucrat.

Our analysis shows that class has a greater correlation with connections to a politician and a bureaucrat compared to caste (see Fig. 5). We find that among the poor—regardless of caste, less than one in five of the respondents had connections with bureaucrats and politicians. Among the non-poor, however, the proportion with connections rises to a third. The forward castes are indeed more connected than the Dalits among the poor or non-poor, but the class differences overwhelm any inter-caste distinctions. (Dalit is the name that former untouchables give themselves.) This should come as no surprise because mechanisms that reproduce caste in India also reproduce class. For example, marriage in India, while it is overwhelmingly an intra-caste affair, reproduces class boundaries as parents match brides and grooms on class and status grounds within a caste.

Do these results hold up when other factors (such as the respondent's gender, age, state of residence, and caste) are controlled for? Table 1 displays the results of a logistic regression, showing quite clearly that poor citizens are far less likely to know either a politician or a bureaucrat. (The income category was scaled from 1 to 5 with 1
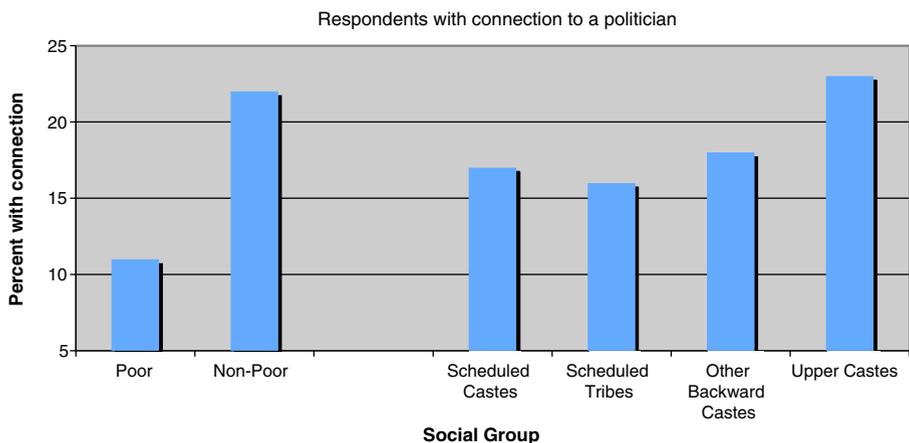

Fig. 3 Respondents with connection to a politician

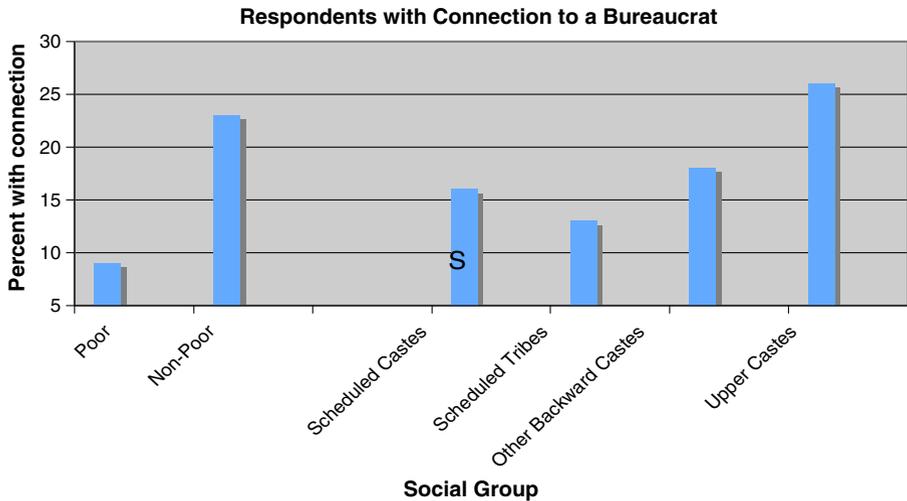**Respondents with Connection to a Bureaucrat**

Fig. 4 Respondents with connection to a bureaucrat

being the wealthiest category and 5 the poorest.) The other demographic variables, apart from gender, have no statistical relationship with whether a respondent knows a politician or a bureaucrat. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that none of the caste categories has a statistical relationship with whether a respondent knows a politician or a bureaucrat.

Not only do the poor have fewer contacts with the state, survey evidence also shows that poor respondents who contact the state are less likely to report that their concerns have been addressed. In the survey we conducted in Tamil Nadu in 2006, we asked citizens more pointed questions about their relationship with the state. Poor citizens replied that they often were not heard and the likelihood of having their problems resolved was also smaller. Among those who reported having gone to a government office, 45 % of the poor said that the government official had not listened to them. By contrast, only 35 % of respondents in the middle- and upper-income group said that they had not been heard. For 53 % of the poor, the problem that had prompted the visit to a government office was not resolved, whereas only 41 % of respondents in the middle- and upper-income group reported similar dissatisfaction.

These differences also appear in the 2009 State of Nation survey. Respondents to that survey who had seen either a politician—that is, a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) or a member of parliament (MP)—or a local bureaucrat were asked about their experiences. Of specific interest was the proportion of respondents who stated that the particular politicians or bureaucrats they saw had been attentive to them. Only 25 % of the poor respondents observed that MLAs had been attentive to them, whereas 50 % of respondents in the middle- and upper-income group thought so. A similar pattern was observed with MPs, although the differences were not so large, with 50 % of the poor reporting that MPs had been attentive and 60 % of respondents in the middle- and upper-income group reporting a similar experience. Thus, the qualitative and the quantitative evidence presented in this part of the paper
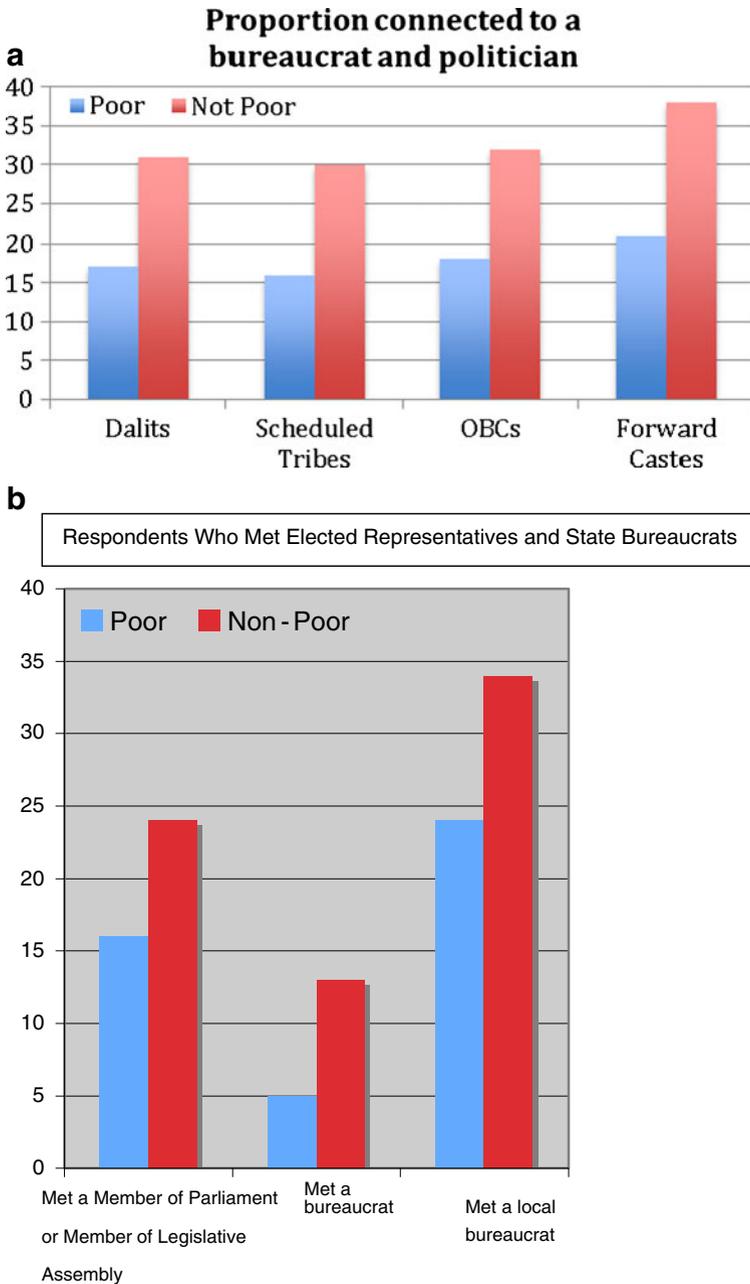
Proportion connected to a bureaucrat and politician

a

b

Respondents Who Met Elected Representatives and State Bureaucrats

Fig. 5 **a** Proportion connected to a bureaucrat and politician. **b** Respondents who met elected representatives and state bureaucrats

have illustrated the extent to which the poor and the non-poor in India have substantively different interactions with the state.

Table 1 Who is connected to a politician and a bureaucrat? (Logistic regression)

	Connected to a politician		Connected to a bureaucrat	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Age	−0.002	0.001	−0.003*	0.001
Class	−0.337**	0.019	−0.445**	0.019
Female	−0.196**	0.045	−0.124**	0.046
Hindu SC	−0.06	0.104	0.58	0.106
Scheduled tribe	0.121	0.128	−0.103.	0.134
Hindu OBC	0.104	0.102	0.041	0.103
Muslim OBC	0.267*	0.134	0.206	0.136
Upper caste	0.108	0.103	0.171	0.104
Muslim	0.02	0.136	−0.080	0.141
Constant	0.042	0.197	0.664	0.191
N	13,356		13,290	
Pseudo R^2	0.0715		0.1089	

Why Do the Poor Use the Language of Rights to Explain Why They Vote?

The evidence presented so far points to the capriciousness of the Indian state in the experience of the poor. In their case, the goodwill of the ever-dominating state is infrequent and arbitrary. How then does it happen that the poor so often use the language of rights in describing why they go to the polls?

An election marks one of the few occasions when the state treats all its citizens as political equals. Elections are held at regular intervals, a fact that makes voting a well-rehearsed act, and the state is quite serious about its obligation to extend this particular right—the right to vote—to all citizens. In fact, over the last two decades or so the Indian state has taken extraordinary steps to ensure every citizen's right to vote (Kapur and Mehta 2005).[19] For example, more than two million police, military,

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[19] Over the past six decades, the Indian state has regularly conducted elections for the national parliament and the state assemblies. An independent electoral commission has overseen these elections, and the election results have seldom been challenged. Incumbents have been replaced regularly, and, as a result, the rate of turnover of elected representatives in India is one of the highest among democratic countries. The use of party symbols on paper ballots in the past—and, more recently, on electronic voting machines—has ensured that illiteracy will not prevent poor voters from choosing parties. As another feature of the electoral process in India, updating the voter lists is the responsibility of the Election Commission. This arrangement relieves poor citizens from the burden of self-registration for voting. A variety of steps have also been taken to reduce the threat of coercion of voters. Historically, intimidation of voters has not been entirely absent. In fact, in the first two decades of India's democratic experience, the landed elite exercised control over the turnout in parts of rural areas (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967), but these practices have been on the decline. The state makes unprecedented security arrangements for elections. In regions known for electoral violence or fraud, elections are staggered over many days to allow for movement of security forces between different areas. In addition, the mass media widely report on electoral malpractice. If irregularities in an election are confirmed, the Election Commission countermands the election results and orders repolling (Lyngdoh 2004). Not surprisingly, the Election Commission enjoys the highest credibility among all state institutions (Linz et al. 2007). With the possible exception of the elections in Jammu and Kashmir, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, and those in some northeastern states, elections in India are largely free and fair, and a large majority of Indian voters see them as such (Rao 2004).

and paramilitary personnel provided security on polling day in the 2009 parliamentary election. Moreover, the Indian Election Commission even records video of polling stations to ensure against electoral fraud. These elaborate efforts to guarantee fairness are unheard of in other functional areas of the Indian state, a state that is by and large known for inefficiency and inconsistent policy implementation.

As we have seen, the poor have fewer contacts with the state than do non-poor citizens, and they report encounters with a state that appears capricious in its attitude toward them. This arbitrariness on the part of the state and its agents leads poor Indian citizens to perceive their enjoyment of political rights as limited. ("We are the forgotten people.") But on Election Day, the state is diligent in its responsibility to the poor. It takes extraordinary and very visible steps to ensure free and fair polling. At the time of an election, agents of the state turn up on the doorsteps of the poor, in sharp contrast to the usual state of affairs. ("I get only five minutes of their time, and sometimes not even that.") On Election Day, the poor have the same rights as everyone else and are no longer dependent on the whims of the state. This change from the Indian state's customary behavior is not lost on poor citizens. Therefore, in our view, they claim the act of voting as their *right* (by contrast with, for example, those middle- and upper-income citizens who regard voting as their civic duty).

The Poor, Political Representation, and the Language of Rights

As shown in Figs. 1 and 2, the poor are more likely than the non-poor to make frequent use of the language of rights in explaining why they turn out to vote. We have attributed their use of such language to their particular relationship with the state. We argue here that the poor use the language of rights in this context because, faced with an otherwise capricious state, voting is the only context in which they feel represented by agents of the state, and the only context in which agents of the state—politicians and bureaucrats—seek and have a sympathetic relationship with them.[20] We found this to be the case in all three states where the focus groups and interviews were conducted, with the pattern of responses being similar for Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu.

To test this argument more fully, we analyzed data drawn from a random probability sample of responses to a survey conducted among voters in Tamil Nadu before the 2006 election. The survey was conducted among 4200 respondents falling under 425 polling booths spread across the entire state. The survey asked respondents an open-ended question about their reasons for voting. The responses were coded to yield two categories. Respondents in the first category said that they voted because voting was their right and/or because voting affirmed their citizenship; these responses were coded 1. Respondents in the second category were those who gave all other answers, including references to carrying out one's civic duty, obtaining benefits, and supporting particular parties or leaders; these responses were coded 0. While coding the responses we looked for the specific language of rights, duty, or

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[20] For a discussion of why a sympathetic relationship between a representative and the people he or she represents is central to political representation, see Rehfeld 2006; Urbinati 2000, 2006; Urbinati and Warren 2008.

exchange that pointed to a particular motivation. This categorical variable was the dependent variable in our analysis.

There were two key independent variables. The first was whether or not the respondent was poor. To obtain these data, we used an income-based classification similar to the one used in our focus groups, interviews, and the Lokniti surveys. The second key independent variable was whether or not the respondent perceived the state as responsive to his or her needs and interests. To obtain these data, we asked respondents whether they felt that their leaders considered their constituents' needs and acted according to their constituents' will and/or for the sake of improving their constituents' welfare. Respondents were given the choice to answer either *yes* or *no*. Those who answered in the affirmative were judged as perceiving the state to be responsive to them. Those who answered in the negative were judged to be, all other things being equal, more likely to use the language of rights in explaining their decision to go to the polls. Thus, although this question did not provide a direct assessment of whether the state acts capriciously toward a segment of the population, it did offer a close approximation of such an assessment.

The survey data also allowed us to control for alternative variables that are prominent in the literature on participation, such as the respondent's socialization, caste, and place of residence and the efforts of parties to mobilize voters. Socialization was measured through two variables: how regularly the respondent had voted in previous elections, and the respondent's level of political interest. Since there are very few upper castes in Tamil Nadu, we used two categories—*Dalit* or non-*Dalit*—to assess the influence of caste. Age and gender were also included as controls. Because it is conceivable that direct contact with a political party may be an additional influence on what respondents think about why they turn out to vote, we assessed political parties' efforts to mobilize voters by including a question about whether or not the respondent had attended an election meeting. Respondents' perceptions of the performance of the two main parties in the election—the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagham—were also included in the model, to account for any party-specific effects. In view of the virtual explosion of television news in India, the regression controlled for whether or not respondents accessed news on television or radio, our expectation being that greater media exposure would generate greater awareness on the part of voters and lead them to assess their reasons for voting. We assessed the role of the state by asking whether the respondent's place of residence was rural or urban and whether the respondent had ever visited a government office. Since the state has less of a presence in rural areas, place of residence served as a proxy for the presence of the state, and those living in rural areas could be expected to be less likely to have visited a government office. Table 2 shows that after these variables were controlled for, the poor and those who said that they were not represented were the only two groups likely to use the language of rights in giving their reasons for going to the polls.

With respect to probability, how much more likely was a respondent to use a rights-based discourse if the respondent was poor and did not feel represented? Figure 6 displays the probabilities that we derived from the logistic regression specified in Table 2 in order to approach this question. What we found is that those who belonged to the middle- and upper-income categories *and* felt that they were represented had a 0.2 probability of using the language of rights, whereas the

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Table 2 Who uses the rights discourse in Tamil Nadu (logistic regression)

	Coefficient	SE
Poor	0.331*	0.123
Accessed TV/radio news	0.063	0.065
Regular voter	−0.021	0.111
Political interests	−0.050	0.101
Attend election meeting	0.314	0.101
Do not feel represented	0.292**	0.123
Ruling parties are not doing a good job	0.186	0.117
Dalit	−0.084	0.144
Went to a government office	0.156	0.121
Age	−0.006	0.005
Gender	−0.073	0.122
Village resident	−0.073	0.133
Constant	−2.097	0.597

*$p<0.01$, **$p<0.05$2-Log likelihood 1,755.695N 1446

poor who said that they were not represented had almost double the probability (0.38) of using the language of rights to explain their choice to go to the polls. The difference in probabilities was most pronounced for these two categories of respondents. By contrast, the difference in probabilities with respect to caste, gender, and locality was either nonexistent or far smaller. This analysis provides further evidence that the poor were more likely than the non-poor to use the language of rights in explaining their voting behavior, and that use of the language of rights was even more pronounced among poor citizens who felt less represented.
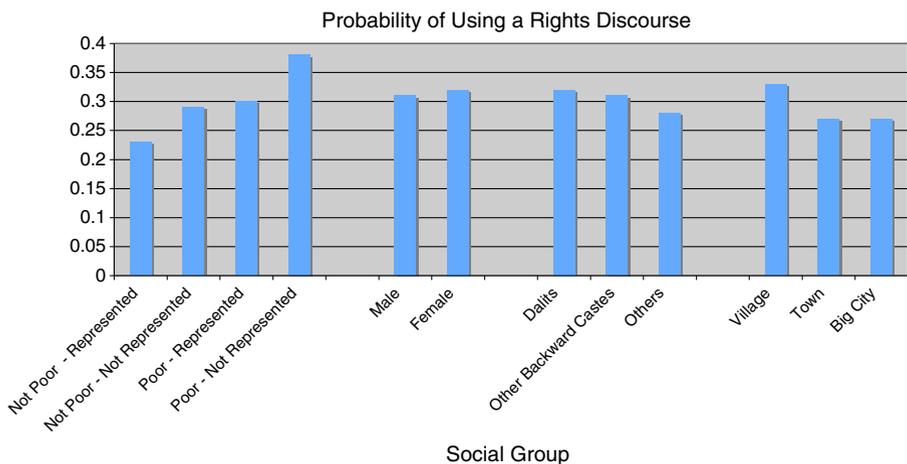

Fig 6 Probability of using a rights discourse

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Caveats and Conclusion

In this paper, we have identified and presented empirical evidence for a previously underreported motivation for turnout among Indian voters. We found that among the poor citizens surveyed and interviewed, the exercise of voting rights and the affirmation of citizenship constitute the dominant motivations for voting. Nevertheless, we also found evidence for the motivations regularly proposed in the political science literature, in that non-poor survey respondents and interview subjects reported being primarily motivated by the promise of patronage or by a sense of civic duty.

It remains to be determined how poor citizens have internalized the language of rights. Membership in civic associations and related organizations is very low among the poor, and so political parties emerge as the most plausible agent responsible for transmitting the language of rights. In the course of our research, we did not observe the use of a rights-based discourse by political parties campaigning among the poor, nor did systematic tracking of electoral campaigns across 45 poor localities in three large states during the 2009 national election reveal much evidence of the language of rights being used by political parties.[21] That said, our findings do not preclude the possibility that such language was used by political parties during past electoral campaigns. Additionally, this language could have also been imbibed from the public sphere, including theater, cinema, religious and civic gatherings that the poor are exposed to. The state and nongovernmental organizations have at different points in time run public campaigns to encourage voting among the electorate. These campaigns could have also been the source of the language of rights. How the language of rights has come to be used by poor voters is a question that requires further research.

Scholars of Indian politics consistently observe that the poor turn out to vote in large numbers and value democracy, but these scholars offer no evidence for why this is so.[22] In fact, despite poor citizens' reports that the state largely neglects, ignores, and mistreats them, the turnout rate among the poor is almost as high as among citizens who are either middle class or rich. This paper may finally help to solve one of the most enduring puzzles of Indian democracy—why the poor vote in such large numbers.

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[21] The locality-level campaign survey was conducted across 138 localities in four states—Bihar, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu—in the months of April and May during the 2009 parliamentary elections. The campaign was observed in these localities in the final week before Election Day when campaigning was at its peak. In Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu a total of 45 poor localities were included in the survey. Twenty-one of these were predominantly SC localities while 24 were predominantly upper and backward caste localities.

[22] Harris (2005) reports similar findings. Using a more exhaustive measure of participation akin to that of Brady et al. (1995), he found that the poor were more likely than the non-poor to be engaged in political activity.

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Amit Ahuja is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His research focuses on the participation and mobilization of marginalized groups. His book manuscript explores the relationship between the social mobilization of a marginalized ethnic group and its electoral mobilization in India.

Pradeep Chhibber is Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley. He has published papers and books on political parties and the politics of India. He is currently working on the relationship between religious practice and political representation in India.