

# Class Voting in the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections

## The Growing Size and Importance of the Middle Classes

E SRIDHARAN

How did the middle- and upper-middle-class voters vote in the 2014 elections? Apart from purely numerical effects, the middle class is electorally more impactful relative to its size because of its human capital and opinion-shaping character. The pro-BJP swing among the middle classes, indicated by the Lokniti post-poll survey, cannot be attributed to an anti-minority shift in middle-class opinion nationally, nor to simple economic dissatisfaction, or to a broader attitudinal shift towards economic liberalisation; we have to search for more complex explanations.

In this paper, I attempt to analyse how the middle class and the other classes voted in the 2014 elections. I focus on the voting for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC), vote preferences along the caste/community and age groups within classes, to the extent relevant, and economic policy, particularly as concerns economic liberalisation. I also attempt to engage with certain theoretical formulations on the middle class, economic liberalisation, the BJP and party system change. The growth of the middle classes with the growth of India's economy, rise in incomes, urbanisation and white-collar occupations, have changed the bipolar elite-mass social structure at Independence into a roughly three-layered elite-middle class-mass social structure. This has been characterised by a broadening middle class, however defined, since liberalisation and faster economic growth post the 1980s, and particularly after 1991. Hence, with growing numbers of this class it is important to analyse middle class voting behaviour. Also, apart from purely numerical effects, the middle class is electorally more impactful relative to its size because of its human capital and opinion-shaping character (Kapur 2010; Deshpande 2003).

But first, how is the middle class defined? The middle class is a nebulous and variable term that can and has been used in various ways in the Indian and comparative literature. It is possible to define the middle class in economic terms by income cut-offs, consumption cut-offs, asset ownership, all three being related, or in sociological terms by occupation, education, or self-identification.<sup>1</sup> The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti post-poll survey categorises the middle class in a particular way and since I depend on this data set in this paper, I follow this definition although I refer to other possible definitions where relevant. The definition used here is a composite class index consisting of a combination of economic (income and ownership of selected durable assets, in particular, the type of house) and sociological criteria (that is, occupation and occupational level), with assets and income adjusted for rural or urban location of the survey respondent.<sup>2</sup> This classification results in the survey respondents being divided into four classes in the following shares of the sample: upper class or upper middle class (11%), middle (36%), lower (33%) and poor (20%). To say a word about this classification before moving on, this classification results in a very large upper strata of 11% and a huge middle class of 36% that roughly coincides with the income-based definition of Bijarpurkar (2007) of the 30% after the top 10% (with 36% and 34% of national income, respectively), resulting in a combined upper

E Sridharan ([upiasi@del2.vsnl.net.in](mailto:upiasi@del2.vsnl.net.in)) is the Academic Director of the University of Pennsylvania Institute for the Advanced Study of India in New Delhi.

and middle class of 47% or nearly half the population, and a poor (20%) that roughly coincides with the pre-Tendulkar Committee, old poverty line poor of 22% in most recent times. This 47% is not far from Bijapurkar's "consuming class" of 375 million, based on the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) data, or about 37% of the population (2001 Census).

The present paper's definition differs from my own earlier estimates (Sridharan 2004, 2008) of the middle class at the start of the 21st century and around 2005-06 in that it is much broader. My estimate based on 1998-99 income-cum-(non-manual) occupation criteria based on NCAER data was that of an elite middle class of about 6% of the population, a broader middle class of 12% and the broadest middle class of 26%. The present upper class in the National Election Study (NES) survey data would be largely coincident with my broader middle class, with my understanding of the elite middle class constituting the top half of the upper class. The present middle class would extend to nearly double that of my estimated 26% broadest middle class. My (Sridharan 2008) "internationally recognisable middle class" based on 2005-06 data would be about 6% of the population and within the current upper class. Also, upper castes, an electorally significant social category, would be disproportionately within the upper class. Hence, in this paper I choose to call the upper class the upper middle class. To call the top 12% of a low-income country like India upper class, implying they are rich, is misleading by world standards. The sample would include only a very tiny number of truly rich persons by world standards or even Indian standards. I look at both this upper middle class and the (NES) middle-class voting patterns and their relationships with age, caste/community, the BJP, INC and economic liberalisation questions. Hence, in this paper I focus on the upper middle and middle classes' voting patterns and expressed opinions in response to electorally relevant questions.

### Theoretical Formulations on the Middle Class

A question raised by the huge 12% swing (from 19% to 31% vote share) for the BJP that has catapulted it into power with a majority on its own is about how its social base has expanded. Have a large section of the upper middle and middle classes, which are disproportionately upper caste, swung behind the BJP, spanning metropolitan cities, other cities/towns and rural areas, aided by higher turnout? And if so, why is this so? What are the changes in class attitudes and towards economic policy that are detectable? These questions also point to the relevance, not necessarily validity, of certain theorisations that I lay out below in brief before looking at the data.

As far back as 1999, in the aftermath of the BJP's rise since 1989, and against the backdrop of its emergence as the single largest party in 1996, 1998 and 1999, Yadav, Kumar and Heath (1999) put forward the concept of a "new social bloc" – a loose coming together of groups united by relative economic and social privilege that were tending towards the BJP – urban rich and middle classes, upper castes and rising landed peasant castes. As they put it, "a new social coalition of various groups, that now lays claim to political power" formed by "the convergence of traditional caste-community differences and class

distinctions...defined by an overlap of social and economic privileges". Desai (2004) makes a similar argument about the incorporation of the middle-caste agrarian capitalists into the BJP's fold either directly or via their regional parties as National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition partners of the BJP in many states.<sup>3</sup> It is worth looking at whether 2014 represents the coming to full fruition of this incipient "new social bloc" at least regionally over a vast swathe of India.

Also relevant here is the formulation by Iversen and Soskice (2006: 178), based on a broad, comparative historical study of Western democracies, that majoritarian electoral systems (of which the Indian first-past-the-post is one) in economies where the labour force is not organised in a corporatist style and where the economy and business is relatively decentralised, engender top-middle coalitions against redistributive pressures by the poor whereas proportional representation systems in corporatist economies tend towards redistributivist middle-bottom coalitions. As they conclude,

...the middle class, which tends to decide who governs, has an incentive to ally with the poor to exploit the rich, but also has an incentive to support the rich to avoid being exploited by the poor. In a majoritarian two-party system, the latter motive dominates because the middle-class cannot be sure that the poor will not set policies in a center-left leadership party.

Relevant to the BJP's domination over the INC even in the lower and poor classes, in both urban and rural areas (and also, the INC's historical dominance for decades), is the issue, much debated globally, of the "poor voter paradox" – why do poor voters in many countries routinely vote for parties that represent the policy interests of the wealthy. Thachil (2014) points out that there are three explanations in the literature – programmatic redistributive shifts (like anti-poverty programmes) undertaken by elite parties, patronage distribution, and "distracting" appeals of identity politics. He argues in favour of a fourth explanation as regards poorer voters voting for the BJP – private provision of local public goods by party-affiliated organisations of the Sangh Parivar – but this is outside the scope of this paper. What is relevant here is whether there has been a shift in attitudes to economic liberalisation, particularly to flagship anti-poverty and employment programmes, among various classes of voters, and whether this adds up to an attitude shift towards economic liberalisation that underpins the BJP victory.

Related to the above formulation, the question arises as to whether this election has seen the party system moving towards a western-style left-right axis ranging from social-democratic redistributivist policies on the Left to free market-oriented policies on the Right, with right-of-centre policies supported by a top-middle, business-middle-class alliance? Is the growing middle class the social base for capitalism that Kohli (1989) had argued a quarter-century ago with reference to the 1980s and Rajiv Gandhi's initial moves towards deregulation of the economy?

### How Did the Upper Middle Class and Middle Class Vote?

A significant difference between 2009 and 2014 was upper middle- and middle-class turnout, both in terms of the higher proportion of the population and hence the total vote constituted

by these two classes (47% from 26% in 2009, Table 1) and in terms of overall turnout increase from 58% to 68% (Table 2).

This is partly due to the definitional effect of the cut-offs for class definitions remaining the same and hence for a much larger percentage of the sample falling in these two classes. Turnout by the poor at 60% is significantly less than the 68% turnout by the two richer classes (Table 2), this pattern resembling the pattern in western countries where the better-off and more educated turn out at higher rates than the poor. Turnout by the upper middle and middle classes is equal to that by the lower class and much higher than the poor class regardless of rural, town/city or metropolitan location (Table 4) except for the upper middle class in towns/cities compared to the lower class (but still higher than the poor).

**Table 1: Class Composition, 2014 and 2009** (NES 2014, 2009)

Class	2009		2014	
Poor	41		20	
Lower	33		33	
Middle	20		36	
Upper	6		11	

**Table 2: Class-wise Turnout, 2014 and 2009** (NES 2014, 2009)

Class	2009		2014	
Poor	57		60	
Lower	59		68	
Middle	60		69	
Upper	57		67	
Total	58		67	

**Table 3: Class-wise Party Preference (2014 and 2009)**

Class	Congress		BJP	
	2009	2014	2009	2014
Poor	27	20	16	24
Lower	29	19	19	31
Middle	29	20	22	32
Upper	29	17	25	38
Total	29	19	19	31

**Table 4: Class-wise Voter Turnout in Rural-Urban Locations**

Class	Village		Town/City		Metro	
	2009	2014	2009	2014	2009	2014
Poor	58	63	56	57	44	50
Lower	60	70	60	64	50	56
Middle	61	71	59	66	52	57
Upper	59	71	53	59	57	69
Total	59	69	58	63	49	57

Also, a larger proportion of metropolitan votes compared to 2009 were accounted by the upper middle and middle class due to their higher turnout and higher proportion. Higher turnout by the upper middle and middle classes in metros could be a sign of things to come in the future as India urbanises rapidly and as the middle classes, holding cut-offs constant, grow in relative size. Since the upper middle and middle classes are disproportionately upper caste we would expect mutual reinforcement in terms of pro-BJP party preference (36% and 25%, respectively), of the upper middle- and middle-class voters were upper caste, 27% of upper middle+middle classes taken together, compared to 22% of all voters, from Table 6. Of the total pro-BJP vote, 52% came from the top two classes (Table 3).

The age group within classes does not seem to have made a big difference overall but it is noteworthy that first-time voters (40% pro-BJP in middle class) and under-35 age groups in upper middle class (Table 5) were disproportionately pro-BJP. This younger age group's relatively greater orientation towards the BJP could possibly be a sign of things to come in the future as this generation rises and the older generations fade out.

The upper middle- and middle-class preference for the BJP (38% and 32%, respectively) was more marked than that of the rest of the sample, being 31% for lower and only 24% for the poor (Table 3), and this is still more marked in the case of the upper-caste component of these two classes (46% middle and 55% upper middle pro-BJP, Table 6). While in 2009, the BJP led the Congress only among the upper castes (36% to 26%, Table 6), in 2014 it led the Congress in all castes/communities except Muslims and Christians but most particularly among the upper castes (Table 6).

**Table 5: Party Preference of Voters by Different Class and Age Groups**

Age Group	Poor		Lower		Middle		Upper	
	Congress	BJP	Congress	BJP	Congress	BJP	Congress	BJP
18-22	23	24	18	35	17	40	11	44
23-25	24	25	18	34	21	32	16	43
26-35	19	27	21	33	19	33	17	40
36-45	18	24	17	30	20	32	15	36
46-55	19	22	21	31	20	31	20	35
56 and above	20	22	18	28	23	29	21	35
Total	20	24	19	31	20	32	17	38

**Table 6: Party Preference of Voters by Different Classes and Caste/Community**

Caste/Community	Poor		Lower		Middle		Upper	
	Congress	BJP	Congress	BJP	Congress	BJP	Congress	BJP
Upper caste	13	37	11	48	15	46	13	55
OBC	15	28	15	37	16	33	14	37
SC	17	22	18	22	20	27	17	25
ST	28	33	31	36	25	39	26	53
Muslims	41	4	34	10	42	11	27	7
Others	19	17	23	18	22	24	31	16
Total	20	24	19	31	20	32	17	38

Source: CSDS Data Unit, Delhi.

Therefore, the data shows a strong affinity for the BJP among the upper middle and middle classes, and among the upper castes who have a disproportionately high share in these classes, as well as the younger age groups among the upper middle and middle. Among the upper middle class in the metros, there is a seeming emergence (Yadav Kumar Heath 1999) of the loose "new social bloc" of economic and social privilege after 15 years of high growth, rising incomes, and greater urbanisation by historical standards. This also seems to fit with the top-middle affinity postulated by Iversen and Soskice for majoritarian electoral systems without a corporatist organisation of the economy.

**Explaining the Upper/Middle Shift towards the BJP**

But why did the upper middle and middle class vote for the BJP disproportionately in 2014? After all this was not the pattern after five years of high growth under United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-I in 2009. So it cannot be assumed that the growth of the upper middle and middle classes automatically translates into pro-BJP preferences. Was it due to an anti-minority sentiment promoted, as an undercurrent, by the BJP campaign, at least in certain states like Uttar Pradesh? Or was it due to a rightward shift in views among the population on economic policy issues? Or was it due to the upper middle and middle classes' dissatisfaction with their economic condition and, implicitly, with the Congress-led UPA government's policies?

Was the upper middle and middle class shift towards the BJP part of a Hindu consolidation on an anti-minority platform? The responses to questions on equal treatment of minorities, and on special provisions for minorities indicate that it was not an anti-minority shift since an above-average solid majority of the upper middle (68%) and middle (62%) classes strongly or somewhat agree on equal treatment of minorities, and only 16% strongly or somewhat disagree, and an above-average majority of the upper middle (61%) and middle (58%) classes strongly or somewhat agree on special provisions for minorities and only 19% strongly or somewhat disagree.<sup>4</sup> Although in response to a question on whether in a democracy the majority community's will should prevail, a majority agree, with a large percentage of "Don't Know/Can't Say", this cannot automatically be interpreted as anti-minority.<sup>5</sup> However, we do not have responses segregated regionally. It is just possible though not at all probable from the solid overall majorities nationally that are not anti-minority, with under 20% who strongly or somewhat disagree on the acceptability of equal treatment and special provisions for minorities, that in the Hindi-belt and western states swept by the BJP, with 61% of the population, attitudes might be anti-minority as a whole. However, it is quite possible that attitudes on minorities might be somewhat less favourable in the pro-BJP regions than the overall average indicates.

Was the pro-BJP swing in response to dissatisfaction with the country's, or the respondents' household economic condition over the past five years? The responses indicate that there was no marked dissatisfaction with the country's economic condition or respondents' household's economic condition over the past five years.<sup>6</sup> Of the upper middle class, 38% say India is better or much better off compared to 34% worse or much worse off with 23% the same in response to the question on the nation's economy; of the middle class, 44% say better or much better off, 25% worse or much worse off, with 23% the same. In response to the question on their household's economic condition, more say their households were better off than worse off. On a more specific issue, electricity supply, more of the upper middle and middle classes felt it had improved rather than deteriorated. Of the upper middle class, 33% felt it had improved, 28% deteriorated with 33% the same. Of the middle class, 34% felt it had improved, 25% deteriorated, and 32% the same.<sup>7</sup> However, on whether employment opportunities have improved, more people in the middle and upper middle classes felt that they had deteriorated rather than improved.<sup>8</sup> Of the upper middle class, 38% felt they had deteriorated compared to 21% improved, with 34% saying they remained the same. Of the middle class, 34% felt they had deteriorated, 20% improved and 35% the same. However, taking responses to economic conditions questions as a whole, simple economic dissatisfaction with the government does not explain the pro-BJP swing.

Was there an attitudinal shift towards economic liberalisation on the whole? This is not indicated by the pro-worker attitudes of all classes in response to a question on whether employers should be responsible for their workers even if their

business is doing badly, or the evenly balanced attitudes on strikes in response to another question on whether the government should curb workers' strikes, or ambivalent attitudes to liberalisation of foreign direct investment.<sup>9</sup>

However, a distinct shift in attitudes is indicated by the responses to a question on whether the government should spend more on infrastructure than on subsidising the poor, in which all classes, most of all the upper middle and middle, are in favour of government spending on infrastructure rather than on subsidies for the poor, something that seems to better fit the implicit message of the BJP/Modi campaign than the Congress one.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the reasons (which are not clear) behind this preference it gives us a clue that the Congress's anti-poverty programmes and employment guarantee programmes did not catch the popular imagination as they apparently did in 2009.

From the above analysis, it seems neither Hindu majoritarianism nor a dissatisfaction with the movement in their economic condition over the past five years explains the pro-BJP swing. One can only speculate that there was a general dissatisfaction with their current economic condition compared to what seem to be heightened expectations/aspirations. BJP/Modi campaign seemed to credibly promise the latter as compared to the lacklustre Congress campaign. The low ratings for the Congress leadership compared to Modi in response to questions on whom respondents prefer as prime minister, picked up by Lokniti and other tracker polls since Modi was projected as the BJP's candidate for prime minister since September 2013, back this up. For the Modi factor there is some support in that as many as 23% of the upper middle and middle classes said they would have voted for a different party than the one they voted for if Modi had not been the candidate, although this is not limited to pro-BJP/NDA voters. Also, this might have been much more the case in the states swept by the BJP but for this we have to look at the regionally disaggregated data.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusions

Overall, one can say that in 2014 the class-wise gradation of pro-BJP responses, with pro-BJP sentiment rising as we go up the class hierarchy, as well as the caste hierarchy, indicate support for the emergence of a loose, not compact, "new social bloc" of class and caste privilege. This supports the Iversen-Soskice (2006) finding that majoritarian electoral systems tend towards a top-middle alliance in the absence of a corporatist economic structure.

However, on economic policy issues, particularly about liberalisation and the role of the state, the responses are much more mixed. As I have argued earlier (Sridharan 2004, 2008), the Indian middle classes' attitudes towards liberalisation are complex and contradictory because a large fraction of the middle class, though declining gradually over time with the growth of the private sector and also as we go up the class hierarchy, are public employees broadly defined. Thus, an estimated 58%-75% of the broadest middle class of 26% of the population as of the turn of the century were either public

employees or (publicly subsidised) rich peasants (Sridharan 2004), and even of the elite middle class of 6% as of 2005-06 as many as 30% belonged to these segments (Sridharan 2008).

Even those of the middle classes who are self-employed persons or private employees are, like public employees or rich peasants, the beneficiaries of a range of state subsidies including water, electricity, fertiliser, credit, fuel, higher education, public transport and even food (which is supposed to go to the truly poor). In India, subsidies are not simply benefits paid to the poor out of taxes paid by the rich, as the debate is framed in developed democracies, particularly by the right. The upper and middle classes as defined in NES account for 48% of the population in 2014, who cannot all be counted as part of a privileged group. Economic liberalisation that rolls back the role of the state would threaten the jobs of both public and private employees, subsidy-dependent rich peasants and other members of the middle classes and that is why one can expect to see the ambivalence or complexity of the responses to liberalisation noted above.

Hence, one can expect the middle classes' political alignments to be complexly determined by competition for patronage interwoven with identity politics, party loyalties and ideology.

Besides, the poorer classes and lower castes have also voted more for BJP than Congress or any other party in this election, a factor that needs explanation, and one that cannot be explained in terms of redistributive programmes or patronage politics except perhaps in the limited number of BJP-ruled states. Class is therefore only one of several axes of polarisation in India in 2014, and class politics in the sense of developed democracies, particularly in Europe, or left-right axis on economic policy as in the those countries, is still not the norm in India.

Overall, given the extremely regionally skewed nature of the BJP victory, with 244 seats of its 282 coming from the Hindi-belt states and western India, accounting for only 61% of the population, we need to have regionally disaggregable survey data to be able to fully comprehend the voting trends by class, caste/community and age groups within each region, as well as the attitudes towards minorities and majoritarianism, and towards economic policy questions, which we do not have as of now.

To sum up, it is too early to be able to confidently project the trends in this election into the future. We will need to observe a couple of more elections to see whether these trends hold.

**NOTES**

- 1 For a review of the literature on possible conceptualisations and definitions and estimates of the Indian middle classes, see Sridharan (2004, 2008) and Kapur (2010).
- 2 Class index developed by the CSDS Data Unit.
- 3 Desai (2004), particularly the first essay, "A Field Guide to Rough Beasts: The Right Politics to Come".
- 4 The questions were, respectively: "The government/state should treat minorities in the same way as it treats the majority?" and "The government should make special provisions to accommodate minorities?"
- 5 The question was: "In a democracy, the will of the majority community should prevail?"
- 6 The questions were, respectively: "As compared to five years ago, would you say the economic condition of India has become much better, better, remained same, become worse or much worse?" and "As compared to five years ago, how is the economic condition of your household today – would you say it has become much better, better, remained same, become worse or much worse?"
- 7 The question was: "During the last five years please tell me whether supply of electricity have improved or deteriorated?"
- 8 The question was: "During the last five years please tell me whether employment opportunities have improved or deteriorated?"
- 9 The questions were, respectively: "Employers should be responsible for taking care of their workers even when their business is not doing well?"; "Government should strongly curb strikes by workers and employees?" "Government should allow foreign companies to freely invest in India without too many restrictions?"
- 10 The question was: "Government should spend more on infrastructure than subsidising the poor?"
- 11 The question was: "Let us assume that in this election Narendra Modi was not the PM candidate of the BJP/NDA. In such a situation, would you have voted for some other party

instead of the party you have voted for or this would have made no difference on your decision?"

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