

Original Article

Unveiling Political Bias: Analyzing the Influence of Party Affiliation on Opinion Formation in Online and Offline Communities

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Abstract - Bias is prevalent in the current political discourse. Online and offline political communities make it easier to foment bias. The increasing role of technology in our lives has led to more polarization in the political landscape. This study aims to study the trends in political bias in terms of the nature and scope of the issue, the association of certain opinions with parties, and whether mentioning a party name causes a swing in the opinion. Respondents to a survey were asked to mention their agreeability to various statements, with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 10 being “Strongly Agree.” A quarter of the statements had party names mentioned in them. Significant trends were observed in the agreeability to a statement when the party name was mentioned in the statement. Trends were also observed across gender and the type of issue.

Keywords - Manifesto, Political bias, Political discourse, Political party.

1. Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary,[1] bias is “the action of supporting or opposing a particular person unfairly because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment.” Biases reflect complex inter-societal relationships. This paper will mainly explore bias in a political context. This need not be taken negatively as biases are reflective of a person’s own thinking, which their own experiences have reinforced. While it is noteworthy that bias is arguably impossible to eliminate, as humans *will* always have personal opinions,[2] it is important to analyze the trends in bias across various fields and issues and take positive steps to eliminate biases that arise arbitrarily.

1.1. Types of Biases in a Political Context

1.1.1. Concision Bias

Selectively omitting context to explain an issue or a view. “In a political context, this can mean the omission of seemingly unnecessary details which can actually constitute the bias in itself depending on what information is deemed unnecessary.”[3] A common example would be showing viewers only a specific part of a politician’s speech without presenting the true context. This may result in a different meaning from the politician’s intended one to be conveyed.

1.1.2. Coverage Bias

Addressing different issues to different extents. This makes some issues seem to be more important than others.[3]

1.1.3. Confirmation Bias

Tendency of persons to interpret and analyze issues in a manner agreeable to their existing beliefs, that is, to “foster the immunity of their hypothesis.”[4]

1.1.4. False Consensus Bias

Tendency to overestimate the number of people who share common beliefs with them. This causes people to fall under a false assumption that their beliefs are widely held while they are not.[5]

1.1.5. Gatekeeping Bias

Withholding certain information and propounding some other information with the aim of controlling the behavior of a large group of people. People who hold strong opinions are more likely to view evidence regarding issues with an objective lens, advancing information that supports their claim and denouncing information that does not.[6]

1.2. Political Communities

A political community is a group of people of a number intending to discuss political issues. These communities may be offline as well as online. Usually, these communities discuss issues pertaining to a particular topic or about a particular party or ideology. Generally, the community forms its own “narrative,” which is the generally accepted opinion on an issue or a range of issues across the community. The feeling that the community as a whole may have its own opinion may cause new members, or members who believe they are non-conforming with the belief of the apparent majority may be influenced by the false-consensus bias.[7] Political communities, especially those discussing sensitive issues, are perfect arenas for fomenting biases.

1.3. Political Discourse

According to A.N. Baranov, political discourse is “the totality of all speech acts used in political discussions, as well as rules of public policy, sanctified by tradition and proven by experience.” [8] This includes every speech,



every statement, and every action taken by parties, political leaders, or their associates, or even by people discussing political issues. In general, political discourse at a point in time may be taken as all topics or issues being discussed in political communities at that time, as well as the opinions surrounding them. It has been observed that with increasing access to technology, people are more willing to discuss political issues online.[9] With an increase in the number of users discussing political issues, there is bound to be a growth in the number of online political communities as well as social media playing an important role in the political discourse (Adults have made very little distinction between a rise in the number of mobile phones and social media usage).[9]

1.4. Prevalence of Bias in Contemporary Politics

The political landscape in various countries around the world is becoming increasingly polarized and partisan. About 60% of Indians feel that manipulating the electorate with false information and rumors has become easier with a rise in social media usage.[9] Another 42% believe that domestic politicians can leverage social media to manipulate their voters.[9] Many parties practice populism, which is the practice of appealing to the ordinary masses by portraying them as the opposite of the elite, who are portrayed as seemingly uncaring of them. An instance of this is the Bhartiya Janata Party in India, which accused the Indian National Congress, NGOs, academia, and English language media of being a part of the so-called “elite.” [10] The strict ideological positioning of various political parties has extrapolated political bias. This may have serious implications for voting patterns,[11] policy-making, and the democratic process in general. Perhaps the most reliable measure of a political party’s ideological and political standpoint is the manifesto they released before elections. While speeches and statements by various parties’ politicians may be interpreted differently, the manifesto explicitly states the party’s line of action and its core issues. It serves as a reflection of their ideology. By carefully examining the manifestos of a party and the reactions they provoke in the electorate, it is possible to study trends in political bias.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aim of this Research Paper

This paper aims to study the various trends in political bias. These trends include the dependence of political opinion on the nature and scope of the issue, whether a particular statement is heavily associated with a single political party, and whether mentioning the party name causes a swing in opinion and trends across gender.

2.2. Data Collection

A survey was designed to collect political opinions on various prevalent issues in the context of Indian politics. This survey collected some basic data on participants, such as their age, gender, and their educational qualifications. Age was clubbed into six categories: <18, 18-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and >60. Participants were asked to indicate whether they supported

any of India's major national/state parties. After this, participants were given a set of statements on various issues ranging from infrastructure to education. These statements were either directly taken from or paraphrased from the 2019 Lok Sabha Election manifestos of major political parties. A quarter of these statements were chosen randomly, and their corresponding party names were attributed to them. Participants were requested to rate how they felt about each statement, 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 10 being “Strongly Agree.” The survey was also made accessible in Hindi, keeping in mind the demographic of the survey population.

2.3. Demographic Details

2.3.1. Age

A majority of the respondents are in the age range of 18-30, as shown in Fig 1. Almost 47% of the respondents are in the age range of 31-50. Other age groups make up only 8.5% of the respondent population.

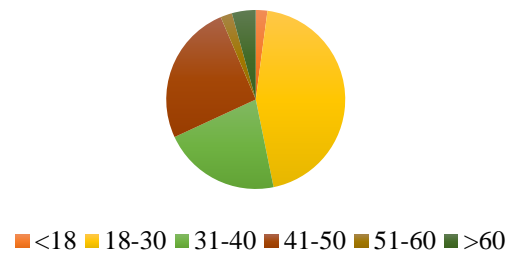


Fig. 1 Distribution of age in the respondent population

2.3.2. Gender

The distribution of gender in the respondent population is 68% males and 32% females.

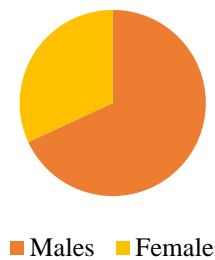


Fig. 2 Gender Distribution in the respondent population.

3.3.3 Educational Qualification

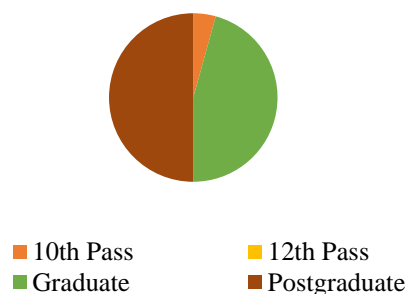


Fig. 3 Distribution of educational qualification in the respondent population

2.4 Dependent and Independent Variables

Table 1. Table of dependent and independent variables

Independent variables	Dependent Variables
Party from whose manifesto the statement was taken	The average value of the responses (1 being strongly disagreed and 10 being strongly agreed)
The category of the statement (Party Name Mentioned/ Party Name not mentioned)	
The category of the issue of the statement	

The dependent and independent variables used can be observed from Table 1.

2.5. Data Analysis

The responses to the survey were grouped in the following ways:

1. The overarching topic of the statement (education, infrastructure, and civil issues.).
2. By the party from whose manifesto the statements were taken.
3. By party name mentioned/not mentioned.

The values attributed to a particular question were taken as the arithmetic mean of all the responses. For trends across issue type, party name mentioned vs not

mentioned, and across gender, the metric used was the arithmetic mean of the average responses to the pertinent questions.

2.6. Ethics

The survey was completely anonymous. No personal information about the respondents was collected. They were given the option to withdraw from this study at any point by writing to the author.

3. Results

3.1. Based on Party Name

The participants' average response when a party's name has been mentioned/not mentioned in the statements has been graphed in. Fig. 4, which has been subdivided into whether the respondents supported the same party, a different part, or no party. From the figure, it can be inferred that when the party name is mentioned in a statement, there is a slight boost in the average response in the respondents who support the same party. There is a decline in the average response in the respondents who do not support the same party or do not support any party. The decline is sharper for those who support another party.

There was a 1.7% increase in average response when the party name was mentioned for people supporting the same party. This is similar to the findings of Perez-Trugila and Cruces. [12] There was a 26.2% decrease in average response when the party's name was mentioned for people supporting a different party. There was a 16.66% decrease in average response when the party's name was mentioned for people supporting no party.

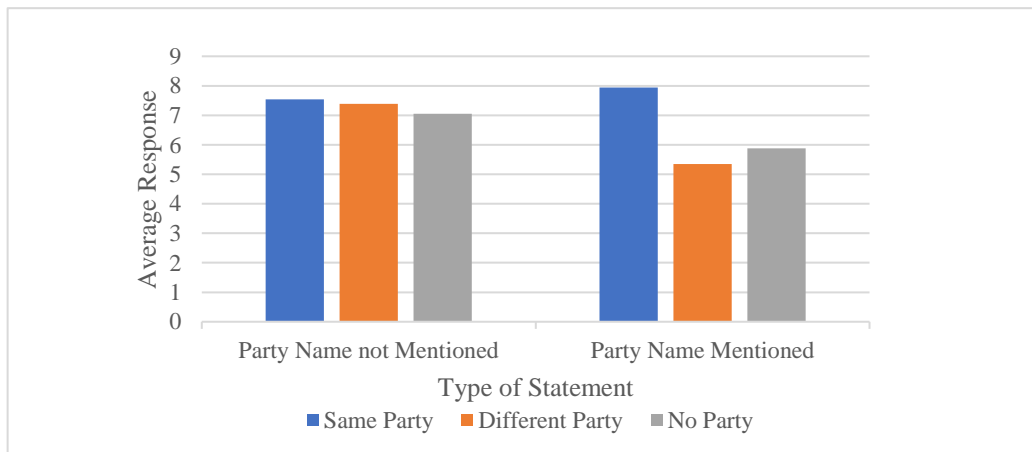


Fig. 4 Average response based on whether the party name was mentioned in the statement or not

The next step is to find out if there is a particular issue where bias is prevalent or not, irrespective of the party's support.

3.2. Based on Issue Type

The most positive response was obtained from infrastructural issues, followed by educational and civil issues. While no significant trends were observed in the party name mentioned vs not mentioned in the case of

infrastructural issues, which can also attribute to the generally positive response, there was some difference noticed in civil and educational issues. Education is the most polarizing issue when party names are mentioned, although it retains an overall positive response, as seen in Fig 6.

Apart from the type of issue, it is important to find out the trends that exist with gender differences.

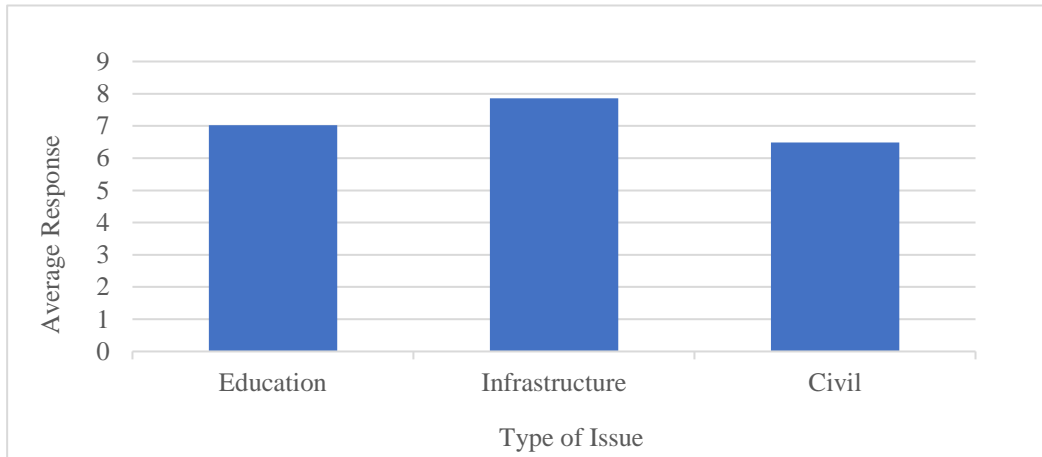


Fig. 5 Distribution of average response based on the type of issue

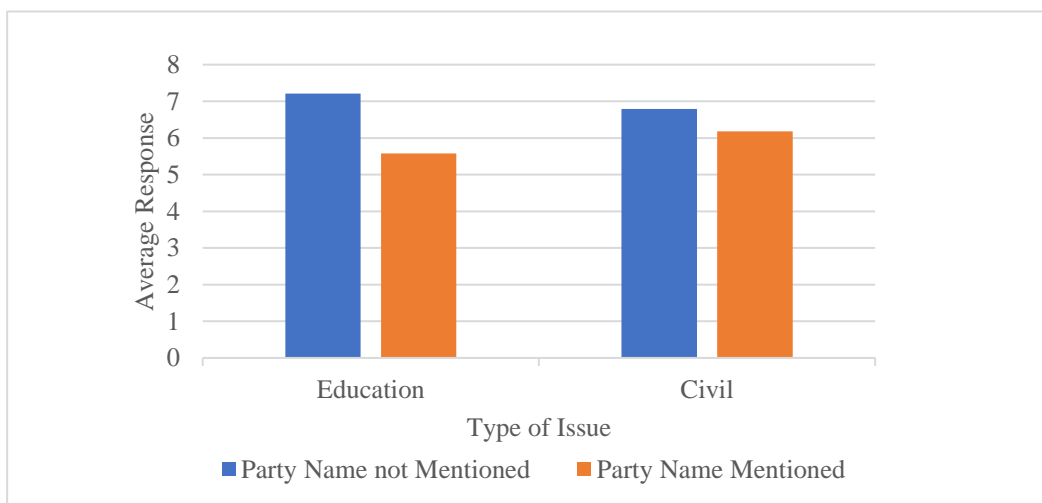


Fig. 6 Subdivision of educational and civil issues based on whether the party name was mentioned in the statement or not

3.3. Trends Across Gender

From Fig. 7, it is seen that the respondents are positive towards infrastructure issues as a whole. Males are seen as less likely to take a stance on an issue and have a more moderate response. Females overall tend to have a more positive response to most issues. The opinion of males

does not vary much, even if the statement is of a different party than what they support. This may also indicate that females being more likely to take a stance on an issue. No observable trends were observed across age and educational qualification in the respondent population.

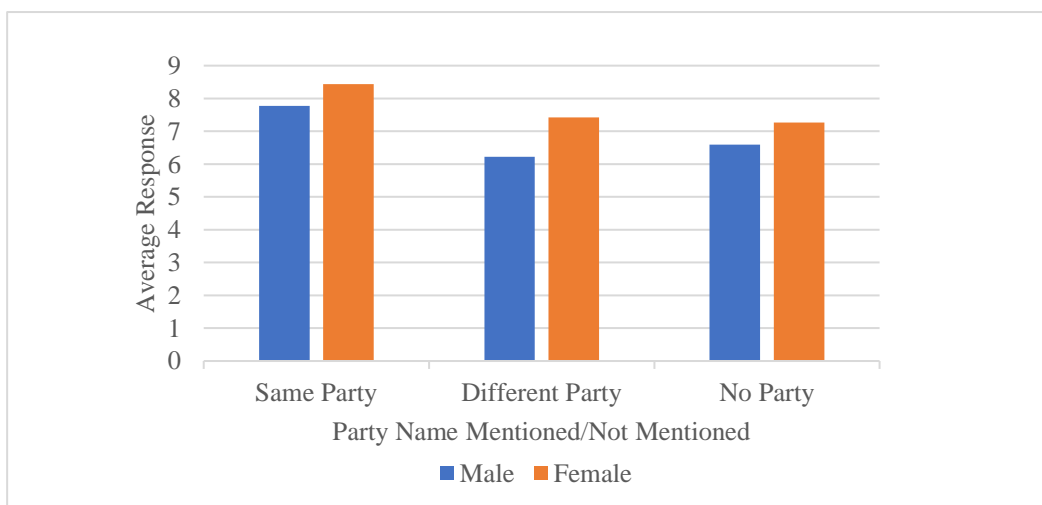


Fig. 7 Male and female subdivision of average response based on issue type

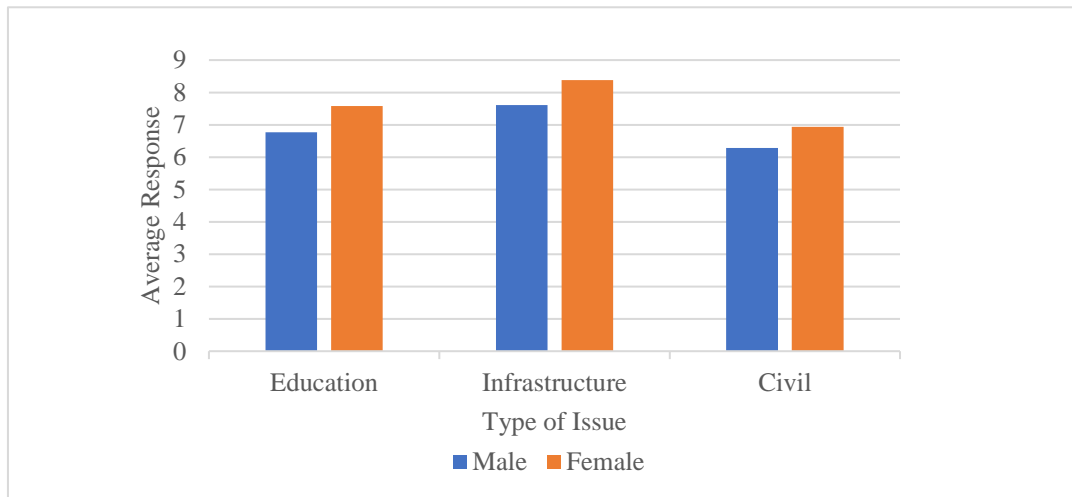


Fig. 8 Male and female subdivisions of average responses based on whether party name was mentioned in the statement or not

4. Discussion

It has been established from the results that the mention of a party name causes a swing in opinion. It is quite significant for those who do not support the party and, surprisingly, even for those who support no party. This is quite similar to instances of bias in media endorsements for particular parties.[13] People who do not support any party are likely to challenge the stances of all political parties.[14] People increasingly want to be informed on educational issues,[15] probably because they affect future generations. In addition to this, the narratives propounded by governments in power can impact education.[16] This can also explain the large polarization in educational issues. As more people want to be and, by extension, are informed on educational issues, a larger number of opinions exist, and as a result, there is greater polarization. Females seem more polar in their responses, having higher agreeability rates. This can be correlated with females taking the side of a political party more than men, who are more likely to be moderate in their responses. This is opposite to the observed trend that females are less likely to express their likes or dislikes towards a party.[17] The moderate agreeability for civil issues indicates that people are less likely to take a stance on civil issues. No trends being observed in age fits in with the observation that there are significant age-related differences in opinion stability on an aggregate.[18] This implies that both older and younger populations are equally likely to have a bias in their opinion. The level of educational qualification is insignificant to bias, which is consistent with the results of Patkós & Szántó.[19]

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5. Conclusion

Manifesto analysis is one of the best ways to understand the electorate as well as the biases in them. This study aimed to analyze the trends in political bias by examining the nature and scope of bias, the association of opinions with parties, and the impact of mentioning a party's name on opinion swings. The research was conducted through a survey that collected political opinions on various issues, with a quarter of the statements mentioning party names. The data analysis focused on issue type, party name mentioned/not mentioned, and gender. Significant trends were observed when the party name was mentioned in a statement. There was a boost in the response of the respondents who supported the same party and a dip in the response of those who did not support that party or did not support any party. Variations in the type of issue were also observed, with education being the most polarizing topic. Females were also shown to have higher agreeability rates than males, perhaps indicative of the fact that they are more likely to take sides when expressing political opinions. This study contributes to understanding the dynamics of bias in contemporary politics and highlights the importance of promoting unbiased and informed discussions. The study was conducted with 48 participants; t-tests may not be statistically significant. It is important to note that this study was specific to the Indian political landscape and might differ for other countries.

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