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Home and Away: Explaining the Paradoxical Political Attitudes of Indian Americans

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Abstract

Do individuals hold fixed political attitudes that persist across different contexts, or do their views shift depending on their group's relative status within each setting? We argue that political preferences are shaped in part by whether one's group is positioned as a majority or a minority in a given context. Groups that consistently occupy minority positions tend to hold stable, liberal attitudes driven by support for minority rights. In contrast, groups that are majorities in one context but minorities in another are more likely to adopt context-specific views, endorsing liberal positions where they are disadvantaged and more conservative stances where they are dominant. We test this argument using an original, nationally representative survey of Indian Americans, a diaspora population for whom both U.S. and Indian politics are politically salient. We delineate two main findings. First, Indian Americans concurrently support more liberal policies when thinking about the United States and more conservative policies when considering the Indian context. Second, these differences are largely driven by religion: while Muslim Indian Americans – minorities in both contexts – maintain consistently liberal attitudes, Hindu Indian Americans express liberal views in the United States but more conservative stances in India, where Hindu majoritarianism has become entrenched. These findings have important implications for understanding political behavior in the United States, as well as the role of group status and perceptions of majoritarianism in shaping attitudes.

Keywords Indian Americans · Political attitudes · Immigration · Majoritarianism

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Introduction

Do individuals hold stable political preferences, or do their views shift in response to changes in group status across political settings? Research from the United States reveals that many low-income, rural, white voters oppose national welfare programs perceived to benefit minority groups, yet support similar initiatives at the local level when they primarily serve their own communities (Hochschild 2018). In Catalonia, decades of repression fueled demands for linguistic equality for Catalan speakers; but once Catalan nationalists gained regional power, they implemented policies that marginalized Spanish-speaking residents (Newman and Trenchs-Parera 2015). These cases illustrate how it may be possible for the same individuals to support dramatically different policies across contexts. The examples suggest that political preferences are not solely driven by ideology; they are also shaped by shifting perceptions of whether one's group is dominant or subordinate in a particular political setting.

This paper investigates this question by studying how individuals reason about politics across different contexts in which their group's social status differs. We examine this question through the case of the Indian diaspora in the United States, a community of 5.2 million people and one of the fastest-expanding ethnic groups in the country. We theorize and analyze the stability of their political attitudes across two contexts: their home country, India, and their host country, the United States. More specifically, we ask: Do individuals who belong to a majority in one context (in our case, Hindu Indian Americans in India) maintain consistent political attitudes when considering another context where they are a minority (the United States)?

Existing scholarship indicates that individuals primarily acquire their political socialization through familial channels (Niemi and Jennings 1991; Jennings and Niemi 1968; Krosnick 1991), underscoring that once acquired, political views tend to remain stable. In contrast, we argue that an individual's political attitudes are also shaped by their ethnic group's status—specifically, whether individuals identify as members of a majority or a minority. Drawing from scholarship in both American and comparative politics, we argue that majority status tends to reduce perceptions of threat and the salience of group-based disadvantage, whereas minority status increases the appeal of protections and policies that promote group equality (Mutz 2018; Posner 2004). We expect, therefore, that political attitudes will vary systematically depending on whether one's group is dominant or subordinate in a given setting

Specifically, we expect that groups that are religious or racial minorities in multiple contexts are more likely to maintain consistent political views across these contexts. We argue that their political attitudes are a function of their ongoing minority status, which fosters a preference for policies favoring minority rights. Conversely, groups that have an inconsistent majority-minority status across contexts will display corresponding changes in political attitudes. For example, immigrants from majority communities in their home countries may hold conservative views with respect to those contexts, while adopting more liberal attitudes with respect to host country policies, where they are minorities and where equal rights become a more pressing concern.

To shed light on these arguments, we fielded an original, nationally representative survey of the Indian American population in the United States ahead of the 2020

election (N = 1200). Existing survey data amalgamates all Asian Americans into a single group, thereby obscuring this group's substantial internal heterogeneity. Indian Americans, the largest Asian immigrant group (by country of origin) in the United States and the second largest overall, represent a demographically and socially significant population. Our design presents respondents with a set of policy questions framed in reference to India and the United States, two countries that are simultaneously salient to the Indian American population but differ in their political and demographic landscapes. We pay particular attention to religious identity, comparing responses from Hindu Indian Americans, who belong to a dominant majority in India but are a minority in the United States, and Muslim Indian Americans, who are minorities in both contexts.

We hypothesize that Muslim Indian Americans will hold similar political attitudes across the two settings, given their stable minority status. By contrast, Hindu Indian Americans, who constitute a strong majority in India – a state whose polity has become dominated by Hindu nationalism – but a clear minority in the United States, will exhibit inconsistent political attitudes. They may adopt inclusive (or liberal) views when considering policies in the United States—where they are minorities and stand to benefit from minority protections—but express more conservative or majoritarian preferences when evaluating similar policies in India, where they are part of the dominant group. Further, we expect that the political attitudes of Muslim Indian Americans will favor policies that prioritize equal rights for all groups.

We enumerate three findings. First, Indian Americans demonstrate concurrent support for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in their home country of India, and the Democratic Party in the United States, their country of residence. These partisan identities appear contradictory as the Democratic Party is typically associated with more liberal policy positions, whereas the BJP is conventionally regarded as advancing a conservative agenda (Jaffrelot 2021). This contrast is also reflected in policy positions: Indian Americans display significantly more liberal stances on a similar set of issues within the American context compared to the Indian context. For instance, the same respondents are significantly more likely to express support for permissive policies towards undocumented immigrants in America, but not in India.

Second, and crucially, these differences across contexts are primarily a function of religion, specifically the relatively conservative inclinations of Hindus. As hypothesized, we find that Muslim respondents hold similarly liberal views on policy in both in India and in the United States. Conversely, Hindu respondents hold more liberal policy attitudes with respect to the U.S. context while simultaneously expressing conservative attitudes with respect to the Indian context on a similar set of issues. Importantly, this stark religious divide remains unexplained by potentially confounding variables such as education, income, or year of immigration– factors that predict selection into the U.S. immigrant pool. They also cannot be explained by experiences with discrimination, engagement with India, political sophistication, or pathways of socialization.

Third, responses to survey questions about policy in the abstract – devoid of country context and posed in a hypothetical manner – result in the expression of very liberal attitudes, with few differences across subgroups. This highlights the poten-

tial for hypothetical questions to overinflate socially desirable views, underscoring existing work seeking to accurately measure preference expression through surveys (Westwood et al. 2022).

Our findings highlight how the same individuals can hold seemingly inconsistent views across different contexts, challenging scholarship in American politics that documents the stability of core political values once they are consolidated (Converse 1962). We emphasize the key role of context and status changes across contexts, illustrating a pathway from such contextual changes to political attitude changes that can have significant implications for political behavior. While our descriptive survey data prevent us from making causal inferences, this kind of description, especially of communities not typically represented in survey data, is the first step towards understanding patterns that can aid in causal designs in the future.

By theorizing about the influence of group status and contextual change on political attitudes, this paper contributes to an extensive literature on identity and political behavior across the world (Tajfel et al. 1979; Chandra 2007). Specifically, it builds on work demonstrating that social identities are not fixed but are socially constructed and defined in relational terms through the construction and maintenance of social boundaries (Barth 1998; Chandra 2012). It also makes key contributions to research on immigration within political science and migration studies (Lafleur and Sa´nchez-Dom´ınguez 2015; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). An extensive body of work has examined immigration's effects on political opinions in host countries (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Zonszein and Grossman 2024), political behavior in home countries (Batista et al. 2019; Lim 2023), and attitudes of host citizens toward immigration (Kustov et al. 2021). However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the politics of migrants themselves. This gap in the literature is particularly striking given the rising political influence of immigrant and diaspora communities in shaping global politics and discourse.[1] In the United States, as of 2022, nearly 25 million immigrants were naturalized U.S. citizens, accounting for 7 percent of the total U.S. population (Batalova 2024). While much of this literature examines diaspora attitudes either in home or host countries, our approach is innovative in asking respondents about the two contexts simultaneously. Finally, this paper also contributes to scholarship on both partisan identity (Green et al. 2004) and religious identity, by exploring the experiences of religious minorities in the United States (Lajevardi and Abrajano 2019).

Theoretical Expectations

The (in)Stability of Political Attitudes

There has been considerable scholarly attention in American politics on issues of party identification and political ideology. On the one hand, a large literature posits that partisanship and political attitudes are relatively stable. According to this per-

[1] Across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, foreign-born residents account for 15 percent of the population.

spective, party identification is a social identity formed relatively early in life and internalized through familial socialization, which subsequently provides a lens for interpreting the world and forming political attitudes consistent with that identity (Jennings and Niemi 1968; Converse 1962; Green et al. 2004). Existing research has demonstrated the limited malleability of both partisanship and political beliefs in this regard. For instance, influences on party identity early in life appear to predict partisan attitudes 40 years later, pointing to the long-term stability and persistence of partisan identity (Kaplan et al. 2025).

On the other hand, the preferences of individuals with moderate levels of political involvement may be relatively more malleable (Zaller 1992). This perspective finds that those with initially less entrenched party identification are more susceptible to change (Tucker et al. 2019). Consequently, a smaller body of literature has examined attitude inconsistency, which refers to the gap between an individual's political attitudes on a specific issue and their corresponding ideological identification (Huckfeldt and Sprague 2000). Furthermore, some studies have found that certain individuals hold conservative preferences on one dimension and liberal preferences on another (Treier and Hillygus 2009), and these individuals tend to identify as moderates. Research concludes that moderates either genuinely hold centrist positions (Fowler et al. 2023) or are cross-pressured across issues (Ahler and Broockman 2018). These individuals typically possess less political sophistication, suggesting that increased knowledge might lead them to adopt more consistent and less centrist views.

While much of the literature on political behavior emphasizes early-life socialization or adaptation to new environments, few studies consider how individuals reason about politics across multiple political contexts that remain simultaneously salient. Immigration offers an ideal opportunity to explore this question. If political preferences are primarily shaped by early socialization, as classic models of political development suggest, then migrants should carry stable ideological frameworks from their countries of origin and seek analogous political cues in their new settings. In line with this view, research shows that the voting behavior of Bolivian immigrants across multiple host countries reflects pre-migration ethnic and economic experiences (Lafleur and Sánchez-Domíngue 2015), and that Moldovan and Swiss immigrants retain political orientations linked to their home-country contexts (Rosca 2019; Goldberg et al. 2019). In the United State, Wals (2011) finds that Mexican immigrants' ideological predispositions in Mexico are mirrored in their American political behavior.

However, other work suggests that migrants may develop multiple, context-specific political identities rather than simply transporting political orientations from one setting to another (Finn 2020; Chauvet et al. 2016). Some studies find that exposure to new social environments—such as liberal urban centers—can reshape political attitudes through peer networks, although the role of selection effects remains unclear (Raychaudhuri 2020). Still, little empirical research systematically compares how immigrants think about politics in their home versus host countries. A rare exception is Mügge et al. (2021), who show that Turkish migrants in the Netherlands support progressive parties locally while backing Erdoğan in Turkish elections—patterns linked to class, but with mechanisms left underexplored.

In this way, our study builds on a rich tradition of scholarship demonstrating that social identities are not fixed, but rather contextually activated and situation-

ally determined (Maxwell 2019). We contend that social identities, and by extension, preferences over political outcomes, change in response to changes in context and environment. Building on Barth (1998)'s foundational work on ethnic boundaries, scholars have shown that the salience and meaning of group identities are fluid, shifting across social and political contexts. Chandra (2012) demonstrates that individuals can activate different ethnic identities depending on the political incentives they face. Similarly, Wimmer (2013)'s boundary-making framework highlights how actors strategically emphasize or downplay ethnic markers in response to institutional structures and power dynamics. These theoretical insights have been empirically applied in diverse settings, including Europe and Africa (Maxwell 2019; Kaufert 1977). Our study builds on this tradition by investigating how majority- or minority-group status shapes individuals' policy preferences across different political contexts, even when the underlying issues remain conceptually similar.

Majorities, Minorities, and Group Status

A substantial body of work in comparative politics examines majoritarianism, focusing on how citizens' relationships with majority identity groups influence their beliefs and behaviors.

Rising majoritarianism often fosters perceptions of majority impunity, enabling targeting of minorities and erosion of democratic norms (Jaffrey 2021; Badrinathan et al. 2024b). These dynamics are reinforced by selective state institutions, such as biased police responses, which amplify perceptions of favoritism (Wilkinson 2006; Knox et al. 2020). Similarly, the American politics literature highlights that social identity shapes voting behavior, with group loyalty often outweighing policy preferences and undermining democratic accountability (Achen and Bartels 2017). Together, these studies demonstrate the impact of group attachments and majority status.

Building on these findings, we argue that perceptions of relative group status can shape political outcomes. For example, Mutz (2018) shows how perceived threats to the majority status of white Americans fueled support for Trump in 2016, while Lajevardi and Abrajano (2019) highlight how resentment toward Muslim minorities predicted voting for the Republican party. More generally, perceptions of state-driven inequalities against minorities can exacerbate grievances and foster conflict (Cederman et al. 2013). With immigration in particular, recent work suggests that minority immigrants winning elections can make dominant native groups feel threatened (Zonszein and Grossman 2024). In sum, an extensive scholarly literature has explored how majority-minority status shapes group members' political attitudes and behaviors, including voting patterns, support for democratic norms, and potential for conflict. If these theories accurately posit that in-group identities and perceptions of majoritarian favoritism can influence political attitudes and behaviors, then shifts in majority-minority status should correspondingly change political attitudes.

Following this, we contend that when minority identity status is salient, groups are more likely to support policies that advance equal rights. In contrast, majority identity groups may exhibit resistance toward such policies. Indian Americans, the focus of this study, represent a clear minority in the U.S. context, comprising less

than 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population. Thus, we anticipate that they will demonstrate notably stronger support for liberal policies—particularly those promoting equal rights for all religions—within the United States relative to their support for similar policies in India. We thus hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1 *Indian Americans hold more liberal attitudes when it comes to U.S. policies relative to their attitudes on similar issues in India.*

But Indian Americans are not a monolith: religion is a key divide in the diaspora, as in India. The community consists of a Hindu majority and a Muslim minority. Muslims, who make up less than 15% of India's population but only 1.2% of the total U.S. population, face marginalization in both contexts (Smith et al. 2025). Their exclusion in India worsened after Narendra Modi's BJP rose to power in 2014, implementing pro-Hindu policies that critics say undermined the secular constitution and intensified anti-Muslim discrimination (Sircar 2022; Jaffrelot 2021). In the United States, Muslim Americans constitute one of the most vulnerable minority groups, facing frequent discrimination from both the public and the government (Williamson 2020). This marginalization came into relief particularly post-9/11, with 75% of Muslim Americans reporting significant discrimination in a 2017 Pew study. We argue this dual minority status fosters consistent (and liberal) political attitudes across contexts.

On the other hand, Hindus form the clear majority in India, comprising over 80% of the country's 1.5 billion population. In contrast, they make up less than 1% of the U.S. population (Smith et al. 2025). If political attitudes were consistent across contexts, Hindu Americans, who predominantly back the Hindu majoritarian BJP in India (Khosla and Vaishnav 2021), would align with the Republican Party in the United States, given both parties' pro-majoritarian, anti-immigration, and anti-minority positions. However, we argue that Hindus' minority status in the United States leads them to adopt more liberal positions on U.S. policies while maintaining conservative views on Indian issues. This shift reflects an adjustment in political behavior as minority rights become more important in the U.S. context, where Hindus may perceive their status shift as salient.

Hypothesis 2 *Muslim Indian Americans hold consistently liberal attitudes with respect to both United States and Indian policies, but Hindu Indian Americans exhibit context difference in political attitudes, adopting significantly less liberal policy views when it comes to India.*

Finally, since respondents' majority/minority status shifts across contexts, we argue that these changes correlate with their perceptions of threat and majoritarian bias (Norton and Sommers 2011). We operationalize perceptions of majoritarian bias by inquiring about respondents' views on whether they perceive various manifestations of nationalism as threatening. Specifically, within the Indian context, we probe whether Hindu nationalism is perceived as a threat to minorities, while within the United States context, we inquire about perceptions of the threat posed by white nationalism. The literature on group status suggests that challenges to existing social hierarchies can lead to efforts to restore status, often through expressions

of societal support for nationalist political forces (Mutz 2018; Wilkins and Kaiser 2014; Gadjanova 2022). We argue that minorities will have heightened perceptions of majoritarian bias relative to groups that are part of the majority community. Indian Muslims, minorities in both India and the United States, are likely to see both white nationalism and Hindu nationalism as threats. Thus we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3 *All Indian Americans perceive white nationalism to be a threat in the United States, but Muslim Indian Americans are more likely to perceive Hindu nationalism in India as a threat relative to Hindu Indian Americans.*

Contextualizing Indian Americans

Recent years have seen growing scholarly interest in immigrant voting behavior, with a focus on the United States. Initially focused on Latino immigrants (Perez and Cobian., 2024; Pérez et al. 2025), this literature has expanded to include Asian Americans (Wong and Ramakrishnan 2023), the fastest-growing group of eligible voters in the country. Asian Americans are projected to become the largest immigrant group in the United States by 2060, reaching an estimated 46 million (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). While Asian Americans historically exhibited weak partisan attachments (Hajnal and Lee 2011), since the late 1990 s they have increasingly identified with the Democratic Party (Wong and Ramakrishnan 2023). Scholars attribute this trend to factors such as the exclusionary rhetoric of Republican leaders (Kuo et al. 2017) and the party's anti-immigration policies (Ramakrishnan 2016), alongside political socialization that has fostered a liberal orientation favoring Democrats (Raychaudhuri 2020).[2]

Within the broader category of Asian Americans, few groups have grown as rapidly as Indian Americans, whose population has roughly doubled each decade over the last 40 years (Chakravorty et al. 2016). They are now the second-largest immigrant group in the United States, behind only Mexican immigrants, with 70 percent having arrived since 2000. This rapid growth has elevated the political significance of Indian Americans, whose eligible voting population often surpasses victory margins in key battleground states like Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania during presidential elections. The community's influence was evident during the 2020 campaign, when the Biden team issued a manifesto targeting Indian American voters, and the Trump campaign released ads featuring Trump sharing the stage with Indian Prime Minister Modi. Additionally, Indian Americans' elevated socio-economic status makes them valuable campaign donors and mobilizers, reinforcing their political clout (Mehta and Moore 2020). The fact that both major parties actively court Indian Americans underscores the perceived fluidity of their partisan and policy preferences, making this voting bloc a critical group in play.

Among Indian Americans, support for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, the BJP, appears strong. Since 2014, the BJP has advanced Hindu national-

[2] In recent years, however, a variety of surveys have shown a small erosion in Asian American support for the Democratic Party; see for example Badrinathan et al. (2024a).

ist policies that position India as a homeland for South Asian Hindus, challenging the country's secular foundations (Jaffrelot 2021). In India, BJP support is overwhelmingly higher among Hindu citizens, while the party typically garners less than ten percent of Muslim votes in general elections. This alignment extends to segments of the Indian American diaspora. For example, in September 2019, around 50,000 Indian Americans gathered in Texas for the "Howdy, Modi!" rally—an extraordinary event, as few foreign leaders hold mass rallies on U.S. soil. This celebration followed Modi's landslide victory in India's 2019 elections and echoed his 2014 Madison Square Garden reception, where he was similarly met with enthusiastic diaspora crowds. But beyond such anecdotes, there remains a lack of systematic data on Indian Americans' views regarding India, the heterogeneity in these views, and the stability of their political attitudes across contexts.

Study Design

To test our arguments, we fielded an original survey before the 2020 election with a representative sample of Indian American U.S. residents (N = 1200), in partnership with YouGov. Our sample comprised adult respondents (18 and older) who identified as Indian American or of Indian origin, including both U.S. citizens and non-citizens. To capture generational differences, we oversampled younger Indian Americans (ages 18–27), as most in this group are U.S.-born, unlike older respondents. All analyses apply sampling weights to ensure representativeness, and we employed a sample matching procedure using data from the American Community Survey (ACS) as a target frame (see Appendix A). To our knowledge, this is one of the first surveys to construct a representative sample of Indian Americans in the United States, enabling a more detailed and accurate understanding of their political attitudes and behaviors.

To test our main argument about whether political attitudes remain stable when reflecting on contexts where respondents change minority-majority status, we included a series of questions on salient policy issues. These comprise our dependent variable measure. Methodologically, comparing attitudes across markedly dissimilar political contexts poses a formidable challenge: simply comparing support for political parties in India and the United States does little to shed light on ideological consistency, as such comparisons mask the nuances of policy issues that parties in both countries stand for. To address this, we pretested and selected five salient policy issues in India that closely paralleled ongoing policy debates in the United States. In Fig. 1 we list the wording of these survey questions and discuss each issue below.

1. **Religious equality:** Both the United States and India have implemented policies critics say violate constitutional protections of religious equality. In December 2019, India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), granting expedited citizenship to migrants associated with a range of communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, with the exception of Muslims—the first law since Independence to explicitly use religion as a criterion for citizenship. In 2017, President Trump signed Executive Order 13769, commonly known as the"Muslim

Abstract	United States	India
How important is it that the media can report the news without state or government censorship? Important = liberal	Do you support/oppose: White House efforts to revoke press credentials of reporters who are critical of the Trump administration. Oppose = liberal	Do you support/oppose: Government efforts to use defamation and sedition laws to silence reporters critical of the Modi administration. Oppose = liberal
Thinking about immigration, would you support or oppose providing undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship? Support = liberal	Do you support/oppose: Enhanced efforts by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials to identify and deport illegal immigrants through border apprehensions and unannounced raids. Oppose = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The proposal for an all-India National Register of Citizens (NRC) to document all legal citizens of India so that illegal migrants can be identified and deported. Oppose = liberal
Do you support or oppose the consideration of race or ethnic identity as a factor in university admissions to improve the representation of historically disadvantaged groups? Support = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The consideration of the racial identity of applicants as a factor in U.S. university admissions to improve the representation of African Americans. Support = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The consideration of the caste identity of applicants as a factor in Indian university admissions to improve the representation of Dalits/Scheduled Castes. Support = liberal
Do you support or oppose this statement: It is important for religious minorities to be treated the same way as the religious majority in a country. Support = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The 2017 presidential executive order to institute a travel ban for citizens from several predominantly Muslim countries. Oppose = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, which creates an expedited path to citizenship for migrants from neighboring countries who illegally entered India by 2014, provided they belong to non-Muslim religions. Oppose = liberal
Do you support or oppose the use of force (such as tear gas, rubber bullets, physical force) by the police against peaceful protesters who are occupying public spaces (such as roads or highways)? Oppose = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The decision by police and law enforcement in some cities to use rubber bullets, tear gas, and physical force against peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters who are occupying public spaces (such as roads or highways). Oppose = liberal	Do you support/oppose: The decision by police and law enforcement in some cities to use rubber bullets, tear gas, and physical force against peaceful protesters who are opposing recent citizenship laws and occupying public spaces (such as roads or highways). Oppose = liberal

Fig. 1 Question wording for policy issues in the India and U.S. contexts. To guard against order effects, we randomize the order in which respondents saw the India policy questions block and the US policy questions block: half the sample saw the India questions first and the other half saw the U.S. questions first. The abstract questions (which reflect the same policy issues but without any country context) appear in the survey between both country blocks

ban," barring entry for visitors (even those with valid visas) from several Muslim-majority countries.

2. **Undocumented immigrants:** Both countries have contemplated policy measures that involve harsh action targeting undocumented immigrants. In India, controversy over the CAA intensified due to its link to the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), a nationwide enumeration aimed at identifying and deporting undocumented residents. In the United States, the first Trump administration strengthened Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) efforts to locate and

deport undocumented immigrants through border apprehensions and surprise raids.

3. **Police brutality:** Police in both countries have engaged in excessive force against protesters. In India, the Delhi Police, under central government control, were criticized for harsh tactics against protesters opposing the CAA and NRC in late 2019 and early 2020. Around the same time in the United States, police faced backlash for using aggressive measures against Black Lives Matter protesters following the police killing of George Floyd.
4. **Media censorship:** The political executive in both countries has used legal or procedural tactics to curb criticism of government that involve silencing or marginalizing journalists. Under Modi's tenure, the Indian government increasingly used criminal defamation and sedition laws to silence critical journalists, intensifying long-standing legal tools to suppress dissent. Similarly, during Trump's first term, the White House broke with precedent by revoking the press credentials of journalists who made critical statements or posed challenging questions about government policy.
5. **Affirmative action:** Both countries have implemented affirmative action to improve access to higher education for historically disadvantaged groups. India has long reserved university seats for marginalized minorities, such as Dalits (Scheduled Castes). But in 2019, Parliament passed a constitutional amendment introducing a 10% quota for economically disadvantaged citizens, shifting the focus from caste to class. In the United States, universities have considered race in admissions to support groups like African Americans. However, conservatives have long opposed this practice. In 2020, a federal appeals court upheld the use of race as a factor in admissions in a landmark case, Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard.

A primary objective in formulating these questions was to ensure comparability across contexts. Recognizing that policy issues differ between countries, we first carefully selected issues that would be meaningfully comparable from a substantive viewpoint. Next, we implemented several design choices. First, we prioritized issues that were salient in both contexts when the survey was conducted. This included policies or positions adopted by the ruling parties in each country (e.g., the Muslim ban in the United States and the CAA and NRC in India) or issues that were widely covered in public discourse and civil society, such as prominent incidents of police brutality against protesters in both countries. Next, we ensured that the wording and phrasing of the questions were as similar as possible to ensure that any findings reflected respondent preferences rather than the way the questions were worded (see Fig. 1 for wording of survey questions). Since our analysis is descriptive in nature, all respondents received policy questions pertaining to both the Indian and American contexts. However, to mitigate order effects on responses, we randomly presented half the sample with the India battery first and the other half with the U.S. battery first.[3] We also included a number of filler questions between the two batteries so

[3] We tested whether the order of display of the different contextual questions affects results; we do not find significant order effects (see Appendix G).

that respondents did not answer them consecutively. Finally, to establish a baseline, we also included abstract policy questions without country context. These design choices bolster confidence that our findings reflect genuine respondent preferences rather than merely design artifacts.

Results

Party Identity and Ideology

We begin by examining the partisan identity and ideological leanings of our sample. Using a standard party identification measure, 56% identified with the Democratic Party, while only 15% aligned with Republicans. On a 7-point ideological scale taken from the American National Election Survey (ANES), nearly half the sample identified as left-leaning: 11% as extremely liberal, 23% as liberal, and 13% as slightly liberal, with only 23% overall on the conservative end. Respondents also rated political parties on a 0–100 feeling thermometer, with the Democratic Party averaging 64 and the Republican Party a significantly lower 41. In summary, our Indian American sample consistently exhibits left-of-center political preferences. This trend contrasts with the typical link between higher income and Republican support but aligns with the correlation between college education and Democratic affiliation (Stonecash et al. 2000; Kitschelt and Rehm 2019). Given Indian Americans' limited alignment with the Republican Party, one might expect a similar (negative) preference toward Modi and the BJP in India. However, we argue that Indian Americans' minority status in the United States leads to attitude inconsistency across contexts.

To explore this, we look at respondent views toward Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Research suggests that Modi's leadership marks a shift from traditional voting behavior, fostering personal political loyalty and a preference for centralized power in strong leaders (Sircar 2020). Given India's complex multi-party landscape, coupled with Modi's dominance, we center our analysis on respondent support and sentiment toward Modi. Our findings reveal strong support for Modi among respondents. Nearly half approve or strongly approve of his performance as prime minister. On a feeling thermometer scale, Modi received an average rating of 57, the highest among Indian politicians and parties surveyed. While Biden and the Democratic Party score slightly higher at 64, this difference is not statistically significant.

Some commentators, including policymakers and journalists, have highlighted the rise of the "Modi Democrat" phenomenon (Shah 2020), referring to American voters who support the Democratic Party while also backing Modi. This alignment is notable given the perceived contrasts between Modi's and his party's policies and those of the Democrats, such as the latter's emphasis on inclusive immigration and the former's support for initiatives like the NRC, widely perceived as marginalizing minorities. Despite substantial media attention, our study is the first, to our knowledge, to empirically investigate this phenomenon.

Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of our sample based on U.S. party affiliation and approval of Modi. Notably, 24% of respondents are"Modi Democrats", forming the largest segment across combinations of U.S. party identification and

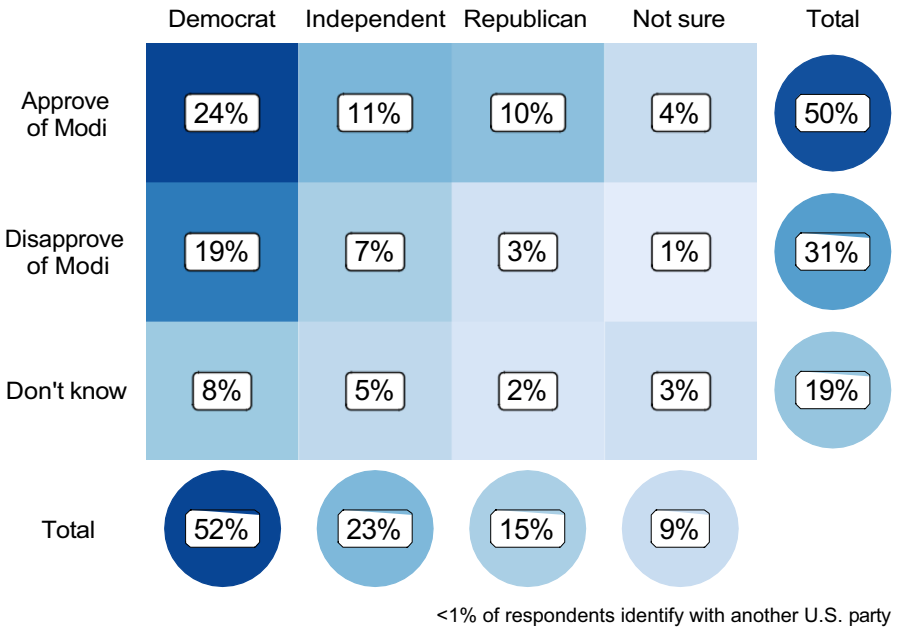

Fig. 2 Overlap of U.S. Partisanship and Attitudes Towards Modi (% of sample)

Modi approval. Among Democrats specifically, 47% approve of Modi, significantly surpassing the 37% who disapprove. In summary, our findings offer suggestive evidence of a correlation between support for Modi and allegiance to the Democratic Party, indicating that Indian Americans hold somewhat inconsistent political perspectives across the Indian and American contexts.

Policy Positions

Next, and central to our argument, we examine consistency in policy attitudes across contexts where respondents differ in majority-minority group status. This focus offers a more nuanced analysis than partisan identity alone. In the polarized U.S. two-party system, supporting both Modi and the Democrats may not necessarily signal inconsistency but rather reflect a pragmatic choice, with respondents finding Republican policies even further from their ideal positions (i.e., although right of the Democrats, the gap between respondents' preferences and Republican policies may be even larger). However, analyzing country-specific policy opinion provides a clearer view of ideological leanings. Using the five issues described in the previous section, we asked respondents questions about support for these issues in both the India context, the U.S. context, as well as in the abstract.

We first look descriptively at support for policies across contexts. Table 1 lists the percent of respondents that support the more liberal option with respect to each policy position (combining strongly support and somewhat support responses). When it comes to opposing police force against protesters and protecting journalists from censorship, similar (and large) proportions of respondents said they support these

Table 1 % Support for policy positions

	% US	% India	Diff. significant
Treating members of all religious groups equally	60.2	49.1	Yes
More permissive policies toward undocumented immigrants	54.5	45.3	Yes
Preventing police use of force against peaceful protesters	67.5	65.1	No
Protection of media from government censorship	71.5	68.8	No
Affirmative action in university admissions	53.5	46.7	No

policies in both the American and Indian context. On the other hand, for the three other issues we asked about, there appears to be large variation in response as a function of the context.

First, on the issue of equal treatment of people from different faiths, 60% support the proposition in the U.S. context (by expressing opposition to Trump's 2017 Muslim ban), but only 49% of respondents supported the proposition in India (by expressing opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act). Next, on the issue of undocumented immigrants, 55% of the sample support less stringent deportation actions in the United States, but this share falls to 45 percent in the case of permissive policies in India (by expressing opposition to the proposed all-India NRC). These differences are statistically significant. Finally, with the question of affirmative action in university admissions, 54% support the notion in the United States and 47% support it in India (but this difference is not statistically significant).

These findings suggest that policy views and ideologies are not uniformly consistent across contexts. The results provide preliminary descriptive support for our hypothesis that Indian Americans hold more liberal positions with respect to United States political policies, compared to India. Notably, the significant contextual differences observed on two of our five policy issues both involve majority-minority dynamics, suggesting that a preference for equal rights for minority religious groups may influence these shifts. The absence of contextual differences in affirmative action may stem from the fact that India's affirmative action scheme is predicated on caste and not religion, while issues like media freedom similarly lack a religious dimension in both contexts. This suggests that differences between contexts are likely to be especially acute when minority rights and religious identity are directly implicated.

These descriptive data on binarized policy support provide an initial glimpse into potential contextual differences in attitudes. In the following sections, we refine our analysis to more precisely capture these contextual variations by taking into account the full range of opinions on each policy issue.

The Role of Religious Identity

Our previous findings support our central argument: partisanship and policy positions can diverge when the majority status of dominant groups shifts across contexts. We now further examine how subgroups within the Indian American population

may vary in their attitudes. We expect Muslim respondents, minorities in both the United States and India, to show consistent views across contexts. In contrast, Hindu respondents, whose majority-minority status shifts, are likely to exhibit contextual variation. As members of the dominant majority group in India, Hindus may favor positions that prioritize their group interests at the expense of minority protections.

To evaluate this argument, we examine the role of religion in party identity, focusing on the"Modi Democrat" phenomenon. Figure 3 compares feelings thermometer ratings toward Modi and the Democratic Party. The graph shows a clear pattern: Hindus are most likely to have positive feelings toward both Modi and the Democrats (upper right quadrant), while Muslims tend to favor the Democrats but have negative feelings toward Modi (bottom right quadrant). This indicates that the link between support for Modi and the Democratic Party is moderated by Hindu identity.

Next, we investigate religious differences in policy attitudes. First, Table 2 looks at policy issues in the Indian context and finds that Muslims are significantly more liberal than Hindus on three issues: treating all religious groups equally, permissive

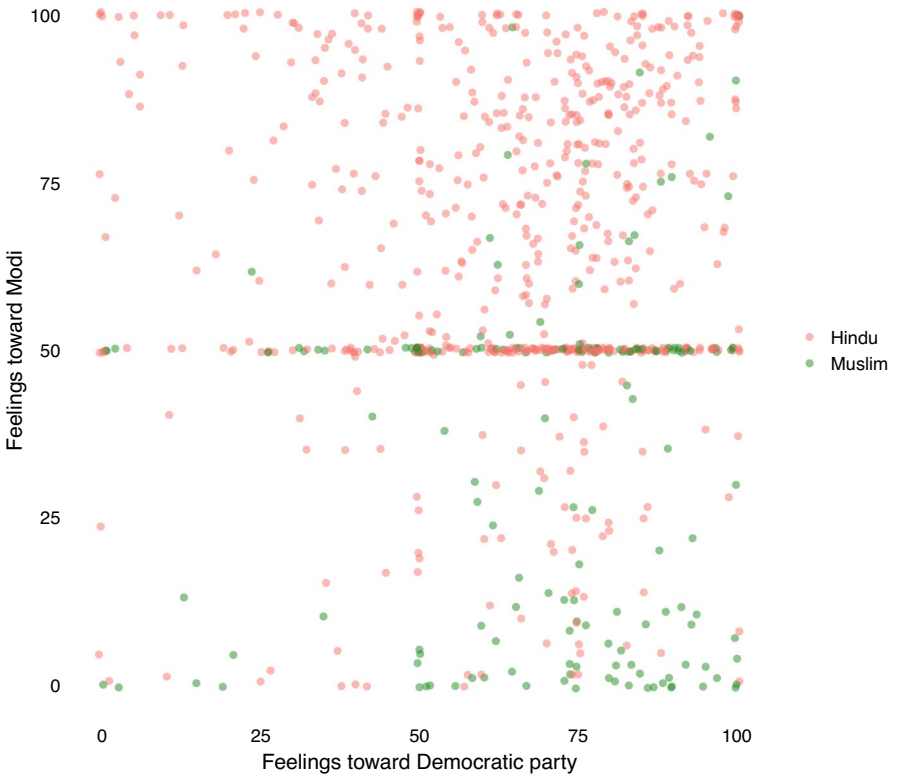

Fig. 3 Religious identities of Modi Democrats

Table 2 % Support for (Liberal) policy positions by religion: Indian context

Variable	% Hindu	% Muslim	Difference	Diff. significant
Treating members of all religious groups equally	38.4	70.9	− 32.5	Yes
More permissive policies towards immigrants	30.4	67.4	− 37.0	Yes
Preventing police force against peaceful protests	57.3	72.8	− 15.5	Yes
Protection of media from gov. censorship	61.5	74.6	− 13.0	No
Affirmative action in university admissions	48.2	42.5	5.7	No

Table 3 % Support for (Liberal) policy positions by religion: U.S. context

Variable	% Hindu	% Muslim	Difference	Diff. significant
Treating members of all religious groups equally	53.8	76.6	− 22.8	Yes
More permissive policies towards immigrants	49.7	60.8	− 11.1	No
Preventing police force against peaceful protests	64.4	69.6	− 5.1	No
Protection of media from gov. censorship	70.5	70.2	0.3	No
Affirmative action in university admissions	48.8	59.7	− 10.9	No

policies toward immigrants, and preventing police violence.[4] In Table 3 we look at policy issues in the United States. Here, we observe a significant difference on only one issue: equal treatment of religious groups, where Muslim respondents hold significantly more liberal opinions, and no difference by religious identity for the other four.[5] Crucially, we note that the Hindu sub-sample is significantly more liberal when considering the U.S. context compared to in India. In fact, while Muslim respondents

[4] While the difference between Hindus and Muslims in their support for protecting the media from government censorship is not statistically significant, Muslims exhibit notably higher levels of support, with a 13 point gap between the two groups. Regarding affirmative action, although it is a minority rights issue in India, Muslim citizens are not beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. As a result, this issue may have been less salient for the Muslim sub-sample in the study.

[5] Although we might expect consistency in issue opinions across religious groups within a given context, the issue of treating religious groups equally was specifically related to the Muslim ban. Consequently, this issue may have been more applicable and salient for the Muslim sub-sample.

displayed no significant differences in the proportions supporting liberal views across contexts, Hindu respondents were significantly more likely to hold liberal views with respect to policies in the United States compared to India on several issues. These findings suggest that policy attitudes are indeed a function of religious identity and, potentially, its changing status across contexts, with Hindus showing more variability in their views depending on the national context and Muslims maintaining more consistently liberal views.

Overall, these results demonstrate that minority/majority differences are more pronounced on policy issues in the Indian context than in the American one. This disparity appears to be driven by differences among Hindus, who exhibit more liberal views in contexts where they are minorities compared to when they are majorities.

These findings accord with scholarly as well as journalistic assessments of Indian Americans' seemingly divergent attitudes at home and abroad. Anderson (2024) finds that the Hindu nationalist narrative and political rhetoric of Hindu victimization in India, which helps engender pro-majority sentiment, resonates with Hindus living in Great Britain, who suffer marginalization and discrimination in their adopted home. The result has been a mutual embrace of majoritarianism in their home country and an overriding concern with minority rights in their host country. This logic has also been described in journalistic accounts. Swain (2024) argues that Hindu members of the Indian diaspora living in settings such as the United States" are so sensitive and even aggressive to protect their perceived minority rights in the country of their residence, at the same time they refuse to accept minorities in India." Or as another commentator put it,"The diaspora Hindutva movement is paradoxical in nature, as it is simultaneously concerned with minority Hindu rights in the foreign land and majority Hindu rights in India" (Rakesh 2018).

While we observe variation in policy responses across religious groups, our descriptive data leaves open the possibility of omitted variable bias. Specifically, religion may be correlated with other variables, such as education and income, which could influence outcomes (for instance, Hindus are disproportionately represented in our sample among those with postgraduate education and higher incomes).

To address this, we introduce a novel dependent variable, *Context Difference*, to capture differences in respondents' political attitudes between the Indian and U.S. contexts. Policy questions are coded from 1 to 4, with 4 being the most liberal response. We calculate the variable as follows: for example, if a respondent holds the most liberal position ("strongly oppose") in the United States but a less liberal one ("somewhat oppose") in India for two issues, their score would be $(4-3)+(4-3)=2$. The possible range spans from $+15$ to -15, where higher values indicate a more liberal stance in the United States. This method captures the full distribution of responses across five issues without binarizing items; collapsing five items into one index also helps avoid issues with multiple comparisons.[6] Plotting the distribution of our dependent variable by religion (Fig. 4), we observe that the distribution for Hindus is more right-skewed than that for Muslims, confirming that Hindus tend to be more liberal in the U.S. context compared to in India. Specifically, the mean score is 1.37 for Hindus and 0.43 for Muslims, a significant difference.

[6] In Appendix B we disaggregate the index into its 5 component parts.

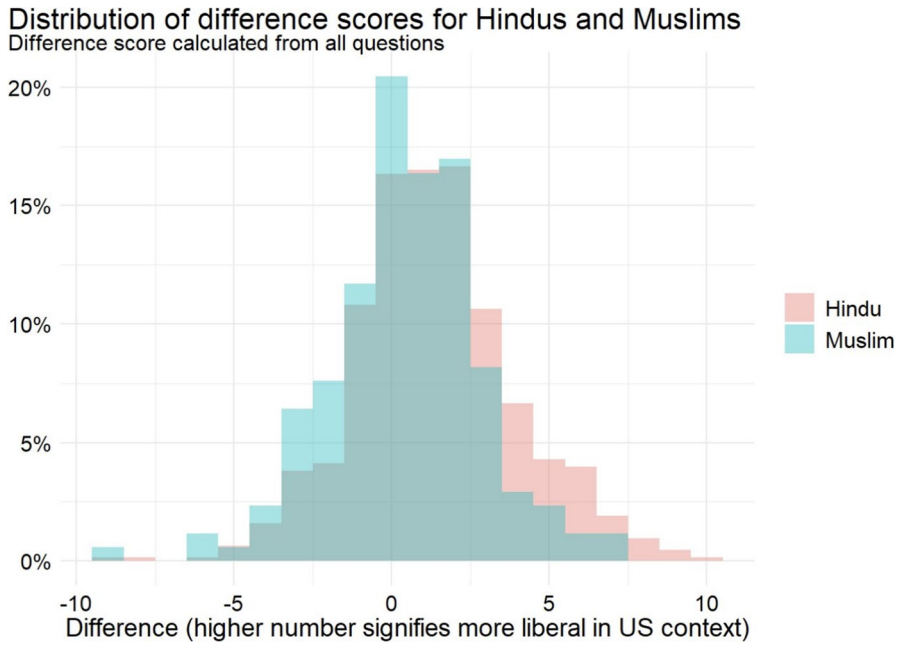

Fig. 4 Distribution of C*ontext Difference* by Religion

Next, to address potential omitted variable bias, we implement several strategies. In line with the approach of Adida et al. (2016), we analyze the correlates of Hindu identity to account for factors that may influence the"assignment" process, and in regression models we then control for variables correlated with religion. Specifically, we regress *Context Difference* on indicators for religion category, alongside several control variables: educational attainment (indicators for undergraduate and postgraduate levels), immigrant status (comparing those born in the United States to those who immigrated from abroad), residence in a politically "blue" state, income above $100,000 USD, age, gender, and voting behavior in 2020.

Several theoretical considerations guide our choice of control variables. Research in American politics links higher income to more conservative views (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2016; Bartels 2012), while college-educated individuals tend to adopt more progressive positions (Grossmann and Hopkins 2024). Scholarship also underscores the influence of geographical context on political attitudes, with residence in "blue" or "red" states shaping political behavior (Hopkins 2017). Therefore, we include an indicator for residence in blue states.

Table 4 displays results from a generalized linear model with survey weights, with *Context Difference* as the outcome. Our main variable of interest is a 3-level categorical variable for religion, with the baseline category set to Muslim. Results show a strong, significant and positive relationship between religious identity – specifically Hindu identity relative to Muslim identity – and our dependent variable capturing differences in political attitudes across contexts. Hindu respondents are significantly more likely to exhibit variation in attitudes between contexts – adopting more liberal

Table 4 Religion's Effect on Context Difference in Attitudes

Dependent variable:	
Context Difference: Higher = More Liberal in the U.S.	
Religion: Hindu	1.181***
	(0.232)
Religion: Other	0.323
	(0.242)
Education: Undergrad	−0.269
	(0.255)
Education: Postgrad	0.150
	(0.275)
Immigrant	0.562**
	(0.204)
Blue state resident	−0.073
	(0.175)
Income over 100 k	0.130
	(0.195)
Male	−0.444*
	(0.176)
Age 30 to 50	−0.298
	(0.223)
Age over 50	−0.335
	(0.271)
Biden voter in 2020	1.359***
	(0.193)
Constant	−0.404
	(0.320)
Observations	1,095
Log Likelihood	−2,641.294
Akaike Inf. Crit	5,306.588

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

views in the U.S. context than in India – whereas Muslim respondents are significantly more likely to have consistent attitudes across contexts. This finding is notable given the correlation between Hindu identity and other demographics in our sample. For instance, Hindus are significantly more likely to hold postgraduate degrees relative to Muslims and possess higher incomes. Despite the potential confounding effects of these variables, we still observe a significant association between Hindu identity and an increased likelihood of more liberal political attitudes in the U.S. context.

To build confidence in these findings, we test whether there is a single policy issue driving our results. To do so, we re-run our baseline model disaggregating our dependent variable, *Context Difference*, into its five component parts. We find that the association between Hindu identity and more liberal attitudes in the United States (in comparison to India) holds for four out of five policy issues (Appendix B), indicating that the effect is not driven by a single topic or policy area.

Our results remain robust across various checks and alternative model specifications, including the use of an OLS model (Appendix B). As an alternative estimation strategy to the models presented in Table 4, we also re-estimate our results using only the first set of policy questions shown to respondents. Because the order of

national context was randomized, focusing exclusively on the first block allows us to treat "context" as randomly assigned: approximately half of respondents received the U.S. questions first—where Hindus are in the minority—while the remainder first answered the India questions. This enables us to examine the effect of being randomly primed with one context versus the other. We report these results in Appendix I. Consistent with the Table 4 findings, respondents who received the U.S. context first express significantly more liberal policy preferences. However, in this specification we do not detect systematic interaction effects between context and religious identity.

Despite results from these alternative specifications, it is nonetheless possible that there are unobserved confounders that we cannot control for. For example, we observe only the cohort that chose to migrate, which may differ in key ways from those who either opted not to migrate or were unsuccessful in doing so. Thus, rather than interpreting observed differences in policy attitudes as a function of the experience of becoming a minority, it is possible that this particular migrant cohort may have held distinct attitudes prior to becoming a minority. Our analysis is therefore limited by an absence of data on the full pool of potential Indian Americans, restricting us to those who completed the migration process.

While we cannot entirely rule out alternative explanations without a causal design, we take several steps to address potential selection effects. One possibility is that experiences of discrimination, rather than group status shifts, drive attitude changes. In an egalitarian society where minorities face little discrimination, status shifts may be less perceptible. For example, Abdelgadir and Fouka (2020) argue that state-led discrimination strengthens minority identity. To explore this, we analyze survey responses on discrimination questions, particularly whether respondents experienced some form of discrimination in the past year. This approach is valuable because, while all Indian Americans are minorities in the United States, only some may experience this status as salient on account of discrimination. Additionally, while we emphasize religious heterogeneity as central to attitudinal shifts, discrimination may also occur based on skin color, gender, or other factors, which allows us to further test our argument on the role of religion. We find that attitude differences across contexts do not vary significantly based on whether respondents reported recent discrimination (Appendix C). This suggests that context-driven attitude changes are not significantly influenced by discrimination experiences alone.

Another potential explanation for the observed differences is respondents' levels of political involvement or sophistication. Research indicates that less politically sophisticated individuals often hold inconsistent views across issues (Ahler and Broockman 2018; Fowler et al. 2023), and that disengaged respondents may choose survey responses that do not reflect their true views (Westwood et al. 2022). This raises the question: does engagement with politics influence attitudes? For U.S.-born or naturalized respondents, prolonged residence in the United States might reduce engagement with Indian politics. Inconsistent views may therefore result from lower political involvement with India rather than becoming a minority. We operationalize this alternative explanation in several ways. First, we assess engagement with India through four distinct measures: a binary measure of whether respondents have a direct family member living in India; an index measure of personal engagement with

India; a continuous measure capturing the importance of one's Indian identity; and a continuous measure of interest in government and public affairs in India (Appendix E). Second, we examine whether context differences in attitudes obtain for the sub-sample that comprises moderates, distinguishing them from partisans by their self-identification as "moderates" on a seven-point ideological scale (Appendix D). Across all measures, we find no significant variation in *Context Difference*: moderates do not exhibit notably different attitudes, and Hindu identity remains a significant predictor of context difference despite controlling for various measures of engagement with India.

Another way of conceptualizing political involvement is to examine respondents' socialization in the United States. Those more deeply socialized or assimilated in American society may show less interest in Indian politics, potentially explaining inconsistent attitudes. Alternatively, those more exposed to other Indian Americans might hold systematically different views on policy in India. We explore this possibility as follows. Under the assumption that attitudes are a function of social environment (Raychaudhuri 2020), we look at the subsample that resides in states with large numbers of other Indian Americans. Results in Appendix F show that differences in attitudes remain consistent regardless of state of residence.

Finally, we examine whether migration experiences condition cross-contextual differences in attitudes, focusing on interactions between religious identity and immigration status, as well as between religious identity and the number of years spent in India. To operationalize the latter, we construct a measure based on respondents' reported year of arrival in the United States, limiting the sample to immigrants who provided this information (N = 647). As expected, this restriction substantially reduces sample size and limits statistical power. Across these specifications (Appendix H), we find no significant interaction between Hindu identity and either immigration status or time spent in India, nor a direct effect of years lived in India on policy attitudes. While limited statistical power may contribute to these null results, they also suggest that Hindu immigrants do not differ systematically from U.S.-born Hindus in the size of their cross-contextual attitudinal gap. This interpretation aligns with our broader argument that the mechanism is not the act of migration, but rather the experience of belonging to multiple political constituencies or identity environments. These findings do not imply that migration is inconsequential. U.S.-born Hindus may still be "pre-treated" via intergenerational exposure to Indian politics, community organizations, or selection processes that our observational design cannot fully disentangle.

Perceptions Of Majoritarian Bias

To explore potential mechanisms, we suggest that shifts in majority/minority status may heighten perceptions of threat and status anxiety (Mutz 2018; Norton and Sommers 2011), which then manifest in inconsistent policy views when considering two different contexts. To operationalize this argument, we ask respondents if they perceive various forms of nationalism as threats. We argue that when groups transition from majority to minority status, this shift should correlate with changes

in their perceptions of majoritarian bias.[7] We proxy for perceptions of majoritarian bias by examining attitudes toward white nationalism and Hindu majoritarianism. At the time of our survey, both the U.S. and Indian governments supported ethnic majorities through policies and rhetoric (e.g., Trump's backing of white nationalism and Modi's promotion of Hindu majoritarianism). If our argument is correct, Indian American Hindus, having shifted to minority status in the United States, should view white supremacy as a significant threat but not Hindu nationalism. In contrast, Indian Muslims, who are minorities in both contexts, should perceive both white nationalism and Hindu majoritarianism as threats.

In Fig. 5, we plot the proportion of respondents who view each form of nationalism as a threat, by religion. Over two-thirds of both Hindus and Muslims consider white supremacy a threat in the United States, with 80% of Muslims and 69% of Hindus expressing this view—though this difference is not statistically significant. In contrast, responses to Hindu nationalism in India exhibit a pronounced divergence between Hindus and Muslims. 74% of Muslims perceive Hindu majoritarianism as problematic, while only 40% of Hindus do. Hindu concern with Hindu majoritarianism is approximately 30 percentage points lower than their perception of white supremacy and also significantly lower than the Muslim perception of both forms of majoritarianism. These descriptive findings support our argument: there is significant variation in how religious subgroups perceive the role of majoritarianism, indicating that majority/minority status shifts are indeed made salient by context.

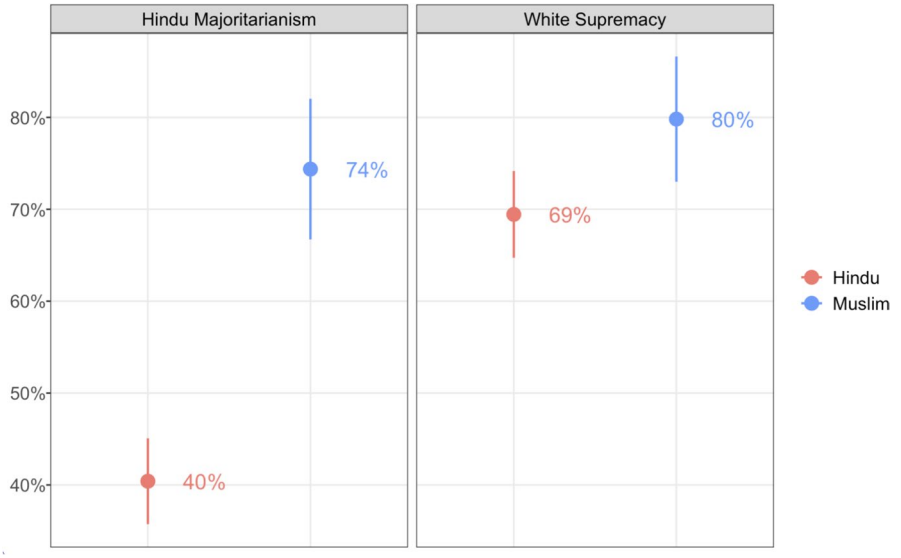

Fig. 5 Perception of Majoritarian Threat, by Religion

[7] We remain agnostic regarding causality between perceptions of nationalism and shifts in status. The relationship could work in either direction: a shift in status might lead to changes in perceptions of majoritarian bias, or heightened perceptions of majoritarian bias could amplify the sense of a status shift, reinforcing a sense of minority status. Regardless of the causal arrow, our focus here is on presenting descriptive findings.

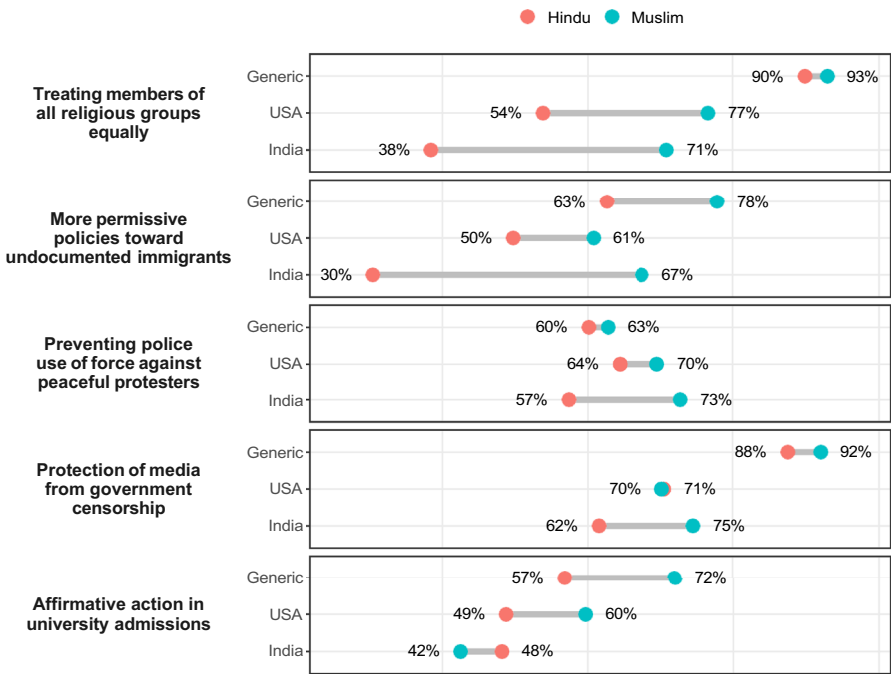

Fig. 6 % Support Policy Positions, Including Generic Context

Contextual Survey Questions

Our results indicate a substantively important finding: the political opinions of immigrants are not constant and fixed; they differ depending on the context which can shape who is perceived as a minority. Additionally, our findings reveal a methodologically significant insight: asking survey questions grounded in a specific context can elicit different responses depending on that context. This observation is critical because previous research has shown that generic survey questions as opposed to context-specific ones can lead to significantly different responses (Westwood et al. 2022). To investigate this further, in a separate survey battery we asked respondents the same set of policy questions but devoid of context. In this case, the responses indicated support for the policy principle in the abstract, such as treating members of all religious groups equally, without information on whether the policy pertained to the United States or India.

We find that in almost all cases (4 out of 5), respondents are significantly more likely to profess liberal views when considering the policy in the abstract. These differences are particularly striking in the cases of support for treating members of all religious groups equally and support for media freedom, with 90 percent and 87 percent support, respectively. Not only are these levels of support for the generic/abstract positions significantly higher than those for the contextual positions, but they also eliminate the religion-based heterogeneity that we see when asking about context (see Fig. 6).

These results underscore several takeaways. First, self-reported policy attitudes may be biased upwards (toward support for the liberal option) when questions are devoid of context. When respondents are allowed multiple interpretations of survey questions (Westwood et al. 2022), they may be inclined to choose the one that paints them in a more socially acceptable manner. Thus, generic questions may be susceptible to social desirability bias and may provoke preference falsification among those perceived to hold less socially desirable (in this case, conservative) views (Kuran 1998; Jiang and Yang 2016). Refining these ambiguous survey questions by providing contextual details both reduces overestimates and reveals identity-specific heterogeneity. This has implications for the design of survey questions on sensitive issues and for understanding how and why documented high support for certain policies may be illusory.

Discussion and Conclusion

Do individuals' political attitudes remain stable across political contexts, or do these attitudes shift between contexts where they are in the minority versus in the majority? Previous research on partisan identity tends to support the view that partisanship remains stable and consistent. We study the case of Indian Americans in the United States and find the opposite: they tend to adopt significantly more liberal stances when considering the U.S. context while holding more conservative views on analogous issues when considering the Indian context, with party identification/politician support mirroring these inconsistent policy views.

Subgroup analyses indicate that this pattern is primarily driven by religious differences: Muslim respondents display consistent political attitudes across both contexts, whereas Hindu respondents do not. Our preferred explanation centers on differences in majority/minority status. In India, Hindus belong to the majority community and occupy a position of relative privilege, whereas in the United States, they are a minority. Conversely, Muslims constitute a marginalized minority in both settings. These perceptions of status differences and threats to majority-minority status ultimately condition the adoption of inconsistent views across contexts.

Our findings have several scholarly and policy implications. From a methodological perspective, they underscore the importance of designing surveys that examine heterogeneity within ethnic subgroups. While previous research has shown that Indian Americans lean Democratic, our data offer a unique look at heterogeneity within this group, not only by religious identity but also by policy preferences across issue areas. Additionally, they highlight how context can influence attitudes, emphasizing the importance of designing surveys that take context into account. Our data show that asking policy questions devoid of specific context can lead to overestimating liberal and socially desirable attitudes.

Substantively, our work expands the scholarship on political behavior, highlighting how dynamics of political socialization may stem from factors beyond the family. Much has been written, especially after Trump's election in 2016, about how status anxiety among white Americans drove them to vote more conservatively (Mutz 2018). Our contribution is to expand this argument to highlight the unique place that

overlapping group identities assume in society and demonstrate how they can be a source of shifting political opinion (Kahan et al. 2017).

Despite the contributions of this study, we acknowledge several limitations. First, our analysis is descriptive rather than causal. Without a causal design, we are limited in our ability to address potential concerns related to selection effects. A natural extension of this work would involve experimental designs that manipulate contextual salience more directly. For instance, future studies could randomly assign respondents to reflect on either the Indian or American context – or neither, as a control – to assess how priming a particular national context or identity affects support for various policies. Such an approach would allow researchers to identify the causal effect of context-based reflection and identity salience on downstream political preferences. Importantly, this experimental framework could extend beyond the Indian American case, offering insights into any setting where individuals hold overlapping or nested group identities and must navigate political settings across multiple contexts.

Another limitation of descriptive data is that it does not allow us to directly test the mechanisms underlying observed patterns. One promising direction for future research would be to exploit external variation in group status—for example, by focusing on geographic areas where Hindus constitute a local majority, such as specific ZIP codes in parts of California or New Jersey. Studying political attitudes in these contexts could help shed light on the role of perceived majority-minority status and offer more direct evidence on the mechanisms driving context-specific shifts in political preferences.

Despite potential omitted variable bias stemming from our descriptive analyses, two factors increase our confidence in our findings. First, asking questions in the abstract (and devoid of country context) provided an opportunity for respondents to give socially desirable answers. Indeed, when asked about abstract policy concerns, higher shares of respondents agreed with liberal positions. Hence, comparisons to these abstract quantities when questions are grounded in context should bring us closer to true preferences. Moreover, if country-specific policy positions are still influenced by demand effects or social desirability bias, then we might be observing lower bounds on effect sizes, as true values are likely even further from the abstract responses. Therefore, we interpret our results as a lower bound on attitude change across contexts in the real world. We note, lastly, that descriptive work is normatively valuable, especially as this is the first systematic examination of heterogeneity within the Indian American community. This foundational data is essential for designing future causal studies, by identifying patterns, elucidating mechanisms, and outlining theoretical arguments.

Second, our study was conducted in 2020 and coincided with heightened majoritarian pride and minority anxieties in both India and the United States. This climate may have influenced minority groups to adopt liberal values as a protective response. Thus, these results may partly be shaped by the unique political dynamics of that period, potentially amplifying or suppressing certain attitudes. With Trump's reelection in 2024 and Modi's continued dominance in India, concerns about the uniqueness of the political environment in 2020 are muted. Majoritarianism is alive and well in both the United States and India. Nevertheless, future research should explore whether these patterns persist across different political contexts and over time. Since

retrospective survey questions may be influenced by present-day perceptions, longitudinal or repeated cross-sectional studies could better capture the evolution of these attitudes. Similarly, we are unable to track individuals' changes in opinion over time, making it unclear whether contextual differences become more salient immediately upon arrival in the United States, or if they gain prominence over time. As such, we note that a core limitation of this work remains that we do not document political attitudes of Indian Americans pre- and post-moving to the United States. In a counterfactual comparison, we would ideally look at changes in political attitudes when moving versus not moving, a question that is beyond the scope of this data.

Despite these limitations, our findings offer important implications for understanding political behavior among individuals who routinely navigate multiple political contexts. While migrants are one illustrative case, the framework we propose, focusing on how shifts in majority-minority status shape political attitudes, applies more broadly. It is relevant to anyone for whom two or more national or subnational political arenas are salient, including individuals embedded in overlapping or nested polities. In this sense, the scope conditions of our argument extend well beyond immigrant populations, offering a generalizable lens for studying how group status influences political reasoning across contexts.

Our findings are also important for the study of Indian Americans in the United States, given their growing political influence driven by their demographic growth, high education, and income. This visibility is evident in recent presidential candidates of Indian descent from both parties (Nikki Haley, Vivek Ramaswamy, and Kamala Harris) and their roles as prominent donors and down-ballot candidates. Understanding their voting behavior and policy preferences is crucial to exploring broader questions about immigrant political behavior in the United States. While this study focuses on a single diaspora community, it offers broader theoretical insights into attitude formation, change, and inconsistency. Beyond Indian Americans, our study offers a framework for examining how political attitudes shift across contexts, potentially applying to groups like Turkish immigrants in Germany, Pakistanis in the United Kingdom, and Brazilian immigrants in the United States, where majority-minority dynamics and social expectations similarly shape identities. Methodologically, it highlights the importance of designing surveys that capture both context-specific and general attitudes to better assess social desirability biases and demand effects. Applying this approach experimentally could yield more robust findings. As a descriptive study, our results likely provide a conservative estimate; a more rigorous causal design could uncover stronger or more nuanced differences in attitude consistency across contexts.

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Data Availability Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the Political Behavior Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/K8CKVJ.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Approval This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board.

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