

The Promise and Limits of Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns*

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Abstract

Opposition parties across contexts have struggled against populist parties at the ballot box. Populist parties often brand the opposition as elite and out of touch with citizens. Over time, as populists amass power, they can further tilt electoral politics in their direction. How can the opposition respond? We examine the opposition's use of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as an electoral strategy against populists. These campaigns directly address the unique weaknesses that the opposition faces against populists by reaching voters directly and improving the party's image. We analyze the electoral impact of these efforts by studying the Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's 150-day grassroots march, the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Using newly collected state and national election data and a difference-in-differences design, we find that the yatra improved Congress's electoral performance; however, in a spatially and temporally limited way. Interview and descriptive evidence explain how these campaigns help the opposition party change their narrative against populists and an original phone survey of 3500 voters reveals that those who directly participated in the grassroots campaign experienced longer-term positive impacts. Taken together, the findings highlight both the potential and the challenges of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as a strategy for opposition parties facing powerful populist incumbents.

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1 Introduction

Populist leaders have ascended to power across regions often pitching themselves as aligned with the masses against the corrupt elite who are favored by opposition parties (Mudde 2004). These personalistic leaders often turn “politics into a war against supposedly craven and dangerous enemies” seeking to “induce their followers to rally around the leader and develop fervent emotional attachments” (Weyland 2024, 4). Empowered by this popular mandate, populist leaders often undermine democratic institutions from within, reshaping institutional rules to consolidate and preserve their power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Weyland 2024). Even when not overtly anti-democratic, such leaders commonly engage in illiberal practices that erode democratic norms and protections (Krastev 2007; Mudde 2019).

Increasingly, scholars have studied the ways to counter this rise of populism and its associated democratic backsliding ranging from aggressive or extra-institutional actions (Bourne 2023; Gamboa 2023) such as protests or even coups to more institutional responses, including electoral coalition building (Samet 2024; Ong 2022) and judicial intervention through litigation (Cleary and Öztürk 2022; Carrión 2022; Gamboa, García-Holgado and González-Ocantos 2024). Perhaps the most obvious yet elusive approach is for the opposition party to defeat the populist at the ballot box. Weyland (2025) notes “elections are, in principle, even more decisive by allowing for the termination of populist tenure and the recovery of liberal pluralism.” However, successful electioneering against an incumbent populist is challenging. Opposition parties often grapple with a pervasive narrative that they are out-of-touch with voters, face exclusion from the mainstream media platforms, and are widely perceived as electorally nonviable given the consolidated dominance of the populist incumbents. This raises a critical question: How can opposition parties effectively reclaim voters from populist parties?

We identify a key strategy employed by opposition parties confronting populists: leader-driven grassroots campaigns. We explain how these campaigns are used to address the weaknesses that opposition parties often face when they are defeated by a populist party. These campaigns aim to counteract negative narratives about the opposition, foster direct connections with citizens, and enhance the party’s perceived electoral viability. In many cases, these strategies are used for traditional party-building or election campaigning but increasingly opposition leaders have used it to counter the vulnerabilities they face against populist parties. From Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s Republican People’s Party (CHP) in Turkey and Lula da Silva’s Workers Party in Brazil to Freeman Mbowe’s Chadema in Tanzania and Peter Magayar’s Tisza Party in Hungary, opposition parties across diverse contexts have adopted leader-driven grassroots mobilization as a strategic response to populist parties and

their accompanying illiberal action.

We study this tactic in the context of India, the world’s largest democracy, which stands out as a setting where leader-driven grassroots campaigns has a central role in reshaping political narratives. Rooted historically in Gandhi’s Salt March in the 1930s as part of India’s independence movement, padyatras or yatras (walking marches, journeys) serve as a means for party leaders to engage directly with citizens at the grassroots, influence political discourse, and cultivate mass support. We study an effort by the Congress party to counter its entrenched out-of-touch reputation and mobilize voter support following two consecutive national losses to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and electoral setbacks across several states.¹ The BJP used a populist strategy that effectively branded the Congress as inept, corrupt, and elitist, exacerbating the continued decline of the party (Naseemullah and Chhibber 2024). While not at the same level as some populists in Europe and Latin America, it has nonetheless engaged in tactics, including media suppression, exploiting electoral finance regulations, and mobilizing majoritarian sentiment (Varshney 2022; Tudor 2023; Allie 2025). In response, the Congress Party leader, Rahul Gandhi, undertook a 150-day-long march, the Bharat Jodo Yatra, across India with the stated goal of uniting India. Gandhi suggested that the Bharat Jodo Yatra (we refer to this as BJY or yatra throughout the paper) represented an effort to listen to citizens’ concerns and pitch an “alternate vision for the idea of India.”²

This paper investigates whether leader-driven grassroots campaigns can revitalize opposition party support in competitive electoral settings. We analyze the political effects of the Bharat Jodo Yatra (BJY), a 150 day long (September 2022– January 2023) cross-country march led by Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi, which aimed to reenergize party cadres and connect with voters directly. Drawing on geospatial data scraped from party social media and official daily schedules, we reconstruct the BJY’s route across India and validate it with local party officials. We merge this data with electoral outcomes from three prior election cycles for the state and national elections held after the march, enabling a difference-in-differences analysis. We find that constituencies traversed by the BJY experienced an average increase of about 4 percentage points in Congress vote share in proximate state elections. While the national elections held eighteen months later show no overall effect, the march yielded significant gains, between 2.3 and 3.0 percentage points, in districts where

¹News articles have pointed to the impact of the yatra (See [Hindustan Times](#)). Verma and Pratikshit (2024) discusses the role of the yatra as part of Congress’ broader 2024 election strategy. Choudhary and Mishra (2024) begin to examine the impact of the yatra by comparing the 2019 and 2024 national elections at the Parliamentary Constituency level, allowing for a coarse research design to examine the impact. This paper moves beyond this existing work by theorizing the broader category of campaigns that yatras are an example of, estimating the impact of the yatra in state and national elections, and investigating the mechanisms by which the yatra impacted political behavior through interviews and an original survey.

²BBC - [Bharat Jodo Yatra: Rahul Gandhi’s unity march ends in Kashmir](#) Last Accessed on 18th June 2025

Congress was the principal opposition to the BJP. These results suggest that personalized, leader-led mobilization efforts can *temporarily* enhance opposition electoral performance, particularly where party identity is already salient and uncontested within anti-incumbent coalitions.

To study the spatial effects of the yatra, we focus on the first state to hold an election after the yatra concluded and collect geo-located polling station-level election results across two election cycles. A difference-in-differences analysis shows that the electoral impact of the yatra was concentrated in polling stations located very close to the route. The observational election data reveals that the yatra improved Congress vote share but only under specific conditions: when elections were temporally proximate, when constituencies were spatially near the yatra route, and when the Congress was the central opposition party. Drawing on interviews with Congress officials and voters, Google Search trends, and descriptive data on follow-up rallies, we identify three key mechanisms behind this effect. First, as a leader-driven grassroots campaign, the yatra helped counter the elite narrative about the party, second, expanded voter outreach in a pro-incumbent environment, and finally improved perceptions of the party’s viability. These changes contributed to electoral improvements for the Congress.

We then investigate the individual-level impact of the yatra using an original telephone survey of about 3500 voters. First, we find that voters from across the political spectrum participated in the yatra. Among the respondents who reported that they participated in the yatra (attending a yatra event, walking with the yatra, etc.), 40% of them voted for the BJP in the 2019 election. Second, we find that respondents who participated in the yatra reported improved perceptions of the opposition, increased discourse about the Congress party, and higher engagement with the Congress party in the year after the yatra. The results underscore two strengths of leader-driven grassroots mobilization. First, they are capable of reaching voters outside of the opposition’s core, such as those voters who previously supported the populist party. This offers a strategy for opposition parties to maintain their core supporters and bring in potential swing voters (Dixit and Londregan 1996; Cox and McCubbins 1986). Second, leader-driven campaigns can generate durable improvements in perceptions of the opposition even a year after the campaign with voters who were directly engaged with the grassroots campaign.

This paper contributes to research on opposition responses to populists, campaigning in the Global South, party politics, and populism in South Asia. First, we contribute to a nascent but growing body of literature on how opposition parties can respond to populism and its associated democratic backsliding (Gamboa 2023; Cleary and Öztürk 2022; McCoy and Somer 2021; Riedl et al. 2024). The paper highlights how leader-driven grassroots

mobilization can work as an electioneering tactic to counter the challenges that populists create for the opposition. Second, while a great deal of research uses campaigns as a way to understand ethnic politics in developing democracies (Ferree 2010; Posner 2005; Horowitz 2016; Arriola et al. 2024), this paper joins recent work that studies party campaigning in its own right in the Global South (Paget 2019; Brierley and Kramon 2020; Goyal 2024; Sheikh 2024). Third, scholarship on weakly institutionalized parties in the developing world highlights disadvantages such as high levels of electoral volatility, low voter linkages, and strong personalist leaders (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring 1999; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). Our findings highlight how a key component of weakly institutionalized parties—centralized party leaders—can be an advantage in helping to respond to populists through leader-driven campaigns, contributing to existing research on the advantages of weakly institutionalized parties (Levitsky 1998, 2003). In the context of India, while extensive research considers the decline of the Congress Party (Chhibber 2001; Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019; Hasan 2012; Dasgupta 2018; Jaffrelo and Kumar 2012), their attempts to rebuild is understudied. This paper examines the most recent high-profile attempt by the party leadership to mobilize mass support. Finally, with the resurgence of populism worldwide, scholars have largely focused on Latin America and Europe. This paper joins recent research on populism in South Asia (Chacko 2018; Naseemullah and Chhibber 2024; Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021) but moves beyond the rise of populism to focus on opposition responses to it.

2 Opposition Strategies Against Populist Incumbents

While the rise of populism and democracy-eroding parties has received significant attention, scholars have paid comparatively less attention to how the opposition can respond effectively. A growing consensus suggests that moderate institutional strategies such as lobbying, litigation, legislating, and electioneering are the most effective opposition strategies (Weyland 2025; Gamboa 2023; Cleary and Öztürk 2022). These are contrasted with extra-institutional and extreme strategies such as coups and impeachment, which are generally more likely to fail (Gamboa 2023). While electoral defeat remains the most decisive constraint on populist power, Weyland (2024) notes “defeating the reelection drive of an incumbent populist president is difficult.” In skewed electoral settings where the narrative of the opposition is that they are inept and elite, the opposition can be drawn to more radical and extra-institutional strategies. However, there are moderate institutional strategies that are available and uniquely capable of addressing the challenges that the opposition faces. We outline the key challenges that the opposition faces against populist parties, particularly those that engage in democratic erosion. We argue that leader-driven, grassroots electoral

mobilization can be a promising moderate strategy to respond to populists in the electoral arena.

2.1 Opposition Party Challenges

Populist leaders emerge and often lead their parties to victory by highlighting the perceived shortcomings of representative democracy. This strategy works best under specific conditions. For instance, political system shocks, such as economic crises or corruption scandals, can increase dissatisfaction among the population with the status quo party (Handlin 2017). Global forces like economic globalization and rising inequality can both intensify voter discontent and destabilize traditional partisan alignments, thereby creating openings for populist outsiders (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty 2022). Polarization at both the voter and elite level can further generate conditions by which populist parties that engage in democratic backsliding can rise (Svolik 2020; Grillo and Prato 2023; Grillo et al. 2024). Yet the very process that facilitates the rise of populist actors poses distinctive challenges for opposition parties. As populists consolidate power and erode democratic institutions, the likelihood of electoral turnover diminishes. In what follows, we identify three core challenges faced by opposition parties seeking to unseat populists through electoral means.

First, the opposition is often burdened by the perception that it is disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens. Central to populist ideology is a binary moral division between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Mudde 2004). Populists argue that the political party in power represents elite interests and is disconnected from the mass public. This framing not only mobilizes a new electoral coalition but also facilitates the erosion of support for incumbent or mainstream parties. For example, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro branded the Worker’s Party as corrupt elites on his path to victory (Hunter and Power 2019). In the United States, Trump positioned establishment Democratic elites as having betrayed “true members of the nation in favor of minorities, immigrants and other putative outsiders” (Bonikowski 2019, 11). Once in power, populists continue to deploy this elite-versus-people rhetoric to delegitimize opposition forces. The persistence of this framing constrains the opposition’s ability to reclaim credibility and rebuild electoral coalitions.

Second, the opposition faces challenges in voter outreach due to attempts by populists, particularly the undemocratic ones, to control the political ecosystem. When in power, populist parties often concentrate control over the media and undermine independent outlets. For example, Fidesz in Hungary used laws to marginalize or eliminate critical media outlets and the PiS in Poland attacked public media and ultimately placed it under partisan control to use for propaganda (Grzymala-Busse 2019). Moreover, In India, under Modi, major

news networks frequently avoid criticizing the ruling party, constrained by threats of state harassment and financial retaliation (Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019). At the same time, allied business elites have also acquired previously independent television channels, tightening the ruling party’s grip over the media landscape. The resulting media asymmetry weakens the opposition’s ability to communicate with the public and articulate a compelling alternative.

Third, as populist incumbents undertake democracy-eroding actions, voters may come to see their victory as inevitable, further dampening the opposition’s prospects of winning back voters. Populists are often known to systematically manipulate elections by tilting the electoral playing field in their favor in a way that is not obviously fraudulent (Bermeo 2016). This involves actions such as unequal access to campaign finance, administrative interference in voter registration, and the intimidation or legal persecution of opposition candidates. In some cases, these tactics catalyze transitions toward competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010). When populist incumbents pursue these strategies, they can foster a sense of futility among opposition supporters, signaling that electoral competition is meaningless or unwinnable. For example, in the lead-up to Turkey’s 2023 elections, Erdoğan used legal charges to ban the prominent Istanbul mayor, İmamoğlu, from contesting for national office. While the mayor appealed the decision, the opposition ultimately refrained from nominating him as their presidential candidate (Esen and Gumuscu 2023). This episode likely signaled to voters that the opposition alliance lacked the institutional leverage to mount a viable electoral challenge, further discouraging support.

2.2 Opposition Response: Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns

How can opposition parties effectively confront the multifaceted challenges posed by populist incumbents, particularly those engaged in democratic erosion. (Weyland 2025) notes that “where a personalistic plebiscitarian leader cannot tamper with the established rules and procedures...open contests have indeed been crucial for protecting democracy from danger” (Weyland 2025, 9). This observation underscores the enduring importance of electoral contestation as a frontline defense against democratic backsliding. We highlight a key electoral strategy that opposition parties have used across contexts: leader-driven grassroots campaigns.

At first glance, the strategy of a leader-driven grassroots campaign might appear paradoxical. On the one hand, the campaign is led from the top down by a prominent political leader, yet on the other hand, it involves bottom-up grassroots mobilization and citizen engagement. However, it is precisely the blending of centralized party leadership and mass-level participation that defines their core dynamic. The primary objective of such campaigns is for party leaders to engage directly with voters, generate enthusiasm and visibility for the

party, and importantly, reverse perceptions of the party’s defeat as being inevitable. Leader-driven grassroots campaigns therefore serve as a crucial tool to confront the core challenges opposition parties face when contesting elections against democracy-eroding populists

First, because populists frame the opposition as elite and disconnected, opposition leaders must actively reconnect with voters and demonstrate responsiveness to popular concerns. Leader-driven grassroots campaigns involve opposition party leaders traveling extensively across the country, meeting voters in their communities, and listening to their grievances. For example, in the 2020 election in Tanzania, Freeman Mbowe, the chairman of the opposition party Chadema, engaged in leader-driven grassroots campaigns. The ruling CCM under John Magufuli in Tanzania used populist “elite versus the masses” rhetoric along with engaging in democratic backsliding tactics (Paget 2019). Mbowe’s “walking rallies” in which he connected directly with citizens on the ground and sought to counter the opposition’s elite image. When he was stopped by the police force, he said “how can I not speak to the people while they stop me and want to speak with me” highlighting his effort to connect with citizens while security forces wanted to stop him (Kwayu 2023, 266). Similarly, in Brazil, Lula da Silva’s Caravan of Hope tour was designed to mobilize grassroots supporters and ensure a coordinated strategic response by the Workers’ Party to populist threats with the needs of the people rather than a bureaucratic approach.³

Second, leader-driven grassroots campaigns can generate critical visibility and public attention for opposition parties, particularly in environments where populist incumbents have monopolized or suppressed independent media. When opposition leaders march across the country, it is often a spectacle that can generate buzz around the party and the leader. Even if the populist-controlled media seek to marginalize or ignore opposition activities, the fact that they are engaging in a high-visibility spectacle can force wider coverage both within and outside the country. For example, during the Justice March in Turkey, while the state-run media highlighted the march as a threat to public order, independent and international media provided favorable and extensive coverage.⁴ Moreover, segments of the march were live streamed and spread across social media platforms. Moreover, in May 2025, Peter Magyar from the Tisza Party, the key opposition to Orban’s Fidesz in Hungary, walked 300 kilometers from Budapest to Oradea, Romania (a city with cultural ties to Hungarian) as part of the One Million Steps for Peace and National Unity March.⁵ The march drew widespread media attention in a constrained pro-Fidesz environment, engaged Hungarians in Romania who often vote in Hungarian elections, and led to reports that Tisza would have enough support to defeat Fidesz today. The combination of positive and negative coverage

³Lula Goes Back to His Roots in Effort to Win Once Again Brazil’s Presidency

⁴A Long March for Justice in Turkey

⁵Magyar’s million steps to Romania — and to power in Hungary?

of these marches allowed the opposition to break through restrictive media and reach a wider audience.

Third, leader-driven grassroots campaigns can signal to voters that the opposition is not completely nonviable as a political option. As populists tilt the electoral playing field, voters may perceive supporting the opposition as a lost cause. In this context, opposition leaders traveling across broad geographic regions communicate the presence of resilient party infrastructure and organizational strength. For example, Chadema’s walking rallies in Tanzania were perceived as only possible due to deep party-building efforts at the grassroots level (Kwayu 2023). Similarly, Lula’s Caravan of Hope was seen as returning to the grassroots mobilization that originally forged the Worker Party from a mass movement (Keck 1986). By engaging in a leader-driven grassroots campaign, opposition parties can demonstrate their organizational capacity and present themselves as credible alternatives to populist incumbents.

Across contexts, opposition parties have engaged in leader-driven grassroots mobilization in their electoral attempt to defeat a populist party, especially one engaged in democratic erosion. This tactic is not unique to only opposition parties or parties that are facing a populist but they are often used under this context because they address the core challenges that the opposition faces when taking on a populist. Moreover, by nature of not being in government, the opposition parties lack access to executive resources and institutional levers that could be used to influence voters. Consequently, grassroots mobilization emerges as a more viable and strategic avenue to engage the electorate, an arena where populist incumbents, preoccupied with governing responsibilities, may invest comparatively less effort.

While leader-driven grassroots campaigns address several key challenges that the opposition faces and therefore could produce electoral gains, several factors may limit the impact. First, the populist incumbent’s grip on their voter base may be too entrenched for such campaigns to significantly sway public opinion. Second, swing voters, those most likely to shift allegiance, may not actively participate in these grassroots efforts, which instead might primarily engage individuals already aligned with the opposition. Furthermore, realizing substantive gains from leader-driven grassroots mobilization likely requires sustained, wide-ranging engagement rather than isolated, episodic efforts. These countervailing dynamics create ambiguous expectations regarding both the effectiveness of these campaigns in altering electoral outcomes and the conditions under which their impact might be limited

3 Context: The Indian National Congress and the Bharat Jodo Yatra

We examine the use of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as an opposition strategy in response to a populist incumbent in India, the world’s largest democracy. We focus on how the opposition Congress Party sought to make electoral inroads against the Bharatiya Janata Party through Rahul Gandhi’s 2022-2023 Bharat Jodo Yatra (“Unite India March”). We begin by situating the yatra within the broader political and institutional context in which it emerged. We then explain how the yatra functioned as a leader-driven grassroots campaign and how it sought to address key vulnerabilities faced by opposition parties challenging populist incumbents.

3.1 The Decline of the Congress and the Rise of the BJP

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 with the goal of demanding representation in the government for educated Indians (Kumar 2024). The initial decades of the Congress focused on an “intellectual agitation” to articulate its demands and goals (Kothari 1964). By the 1920s and 1930s, the party had transformed into “a mass movement with depth and traditions,” a shift largely driven by Gandhi’s grassroots mobilization efforts that united citizens across ethnic and regional lines (Kothari 1964; Kumar 2024; Bhavnani and Jha 2014).

Scholars have long characterized India’s party system around the electoral centrality of the Congress Party since Independence (Yadav 1999; Vaishnav and Hintson 2019). In the two decades following 1947, Congress functioned as a “party of consensus,” despite its dependence on particular social coalitions across states (Kothari 1964; Weiner 1967). A fragmented opposition enabled Congress to dominate both national and state elections during this period (Vaishnav and Hintson 2019; Yadav 1999). The Congress party’s primary competition was not from the opposition parties but from factions within the party itself (Brass 1965; Kochanek 1968), which the party was able to manage well in this period (Weiner 1967; Kothari 1964).

From 1967-1989, the INC began to lose out at the state level but retained dominance nationally, even recovering after its defeat following Indira Gandhi’s moment of authoritarianism during the Emergency (Yadav 1999). During this phase, the Congress Party increasingly came to depend on its control over state institutions to distribute patronage, marking a departure from its earlier identity as a mass movement (Wilkinson 2007; Chhibber 2001). For example, Chhibber (2001) notes how Congress party workers became attuned to

the role of resources in mobilizing votes, making their motivations for joining the party more reflective of self-interest than to influence policy. [Wilkinson \(2007\)](#) notes that as competition intensified, clientelism became both more extensive and more systematic.

Between 1989 and 2014, the rise of caste-based, religious, and class mobilization disrupted Congress’s status as “the single pole around which politics revolved” ([Vaishnav and Hinton 2019](#)). A confluence of factors contributed to its decline: ideological incoherence ([Chhibber and Verma 2018](#); [Hasan 2022](#)), weakened organizational structure ([Kothari 1964](#); [Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019](#); [Hasan 2012](#)), persistent intra-party factionalism ([Brass 1965](#)), rising opposition coordination ([Tudor and Ziegfeld 2019](#)), sociopolitical shifts induced by the Green Revolution ([Dasgupta 2018](#)), and the rise of new political identities ([Jaffrelot and Kumar 2012](#)). In 2014 and 2019, Congress suffered two consecutive major losses to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the national level, ushering in the fourth party system with the BJP at the center of politics ([Vaishnav and Hinton 2019](#)).

The BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi exhibited common elements of populism. The party was founded in 1980 but its institutional roots go further back to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and its organizational roots to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The current version of the BJP under Modi came to power at the national level in 2014. In this election, Modi employed a classic populist framing: portraying the Congress Party as a corrupt elite and himself as the authentic voice of the masses ([Jaffrelot 2021](#)). By 2019 when the BJP won its second victory, Modi and the BJP continued to exhibit populist elements while also taking a turn to democracy-limiting behavior that often accompanies populists. Modi continued to pitch himself as representing the masses which was increasingly pitched as the Hindu majority, further highlighting the party’s Hindu nationalist ideology ([Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021](#); [Leidig and Mudde 2023](#)). Alongside this majoritarian rhetoric, the BJP curtailed space for dissent by tightening controls over civil society and the press and enacting changes to campaign finance regulations that disproportionately advantaged the ruling party ([Tudor 2023](#); [Varshney 2022](#)).

In this context, opposition parties, especially the Congress, entered the 2024 national elections and several key state contests facing formidable constraints. The BJP’s populist messaging cast the opposition as disconnected elites, while a constrained political environment and growing perceptions of the ruling party’s dominance contributed to the widespread belief that the opposition lacked electoral viability.

3.2 The Bharat Jodo Yatra as a Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaign

Rahul Gandhi led the Bharat Jodo Yatra, or “Unite India March” with his stated goal to bring the country together and connect with citizens at the grassroots. Gandhi traveled over 4000 kilometers (about 2500 miles) by foot across 150 days from the southern tip of Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu to the northern point of Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir. We conceptualize the Bharat Jodo Yatra as a leader-driven grassroots campaign that served as an electoral strategy against the incumbent populist party that has increasingly centralized power and reshaped the democratic landscape.

(Pada)yatras, or marches on foot, hold deep historical, cultural, spiritual, and political importance in India. They promote cultural integration and unity by bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to share their customs and traditions. Politicians and activists often leverage padayatra for mass mobilization and campaigning. These yatras provide direct access to the masses, with politicians using them to advance cultural, political, and national causes.

Perhaps the most famous yatra remains Mahatma Gandhi’s Dandi March in 1930, a non-violent protest against the British salt tax that galvanized mass participation and drew international attention to India’s independence movement (Bhavnani and Jha 2014). Gandhi’s yatra demonstrated the power of grassroots mobilization, setting a precedent for using yatras as tools for political activism and engagement.

In post-independent India, yatras have continued to play a significant role. L.K. Advani’s Rath Yatra in 1990 is a notable example. This yatra was organized to mobilize support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and played a pivotal role in expanding the BJP’s political base, marking a significant moment in the rise of Hindu nationalism (Blakeslee 2018; Kalra 2021). It energized the party’s base, attracted new supporters, and marked the rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. Narendra Modi’s Gujarat Gaurav Padyatra in 2002 celebrated Gujarat’s development achievement and bolstered his political standing, contributing to his electoral success.⁶ In 2004, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, a regional Congress leader in the erstwhile state of undivided Andhra Pradesh, undertook a three-month-long yatra. He used this as an opportunity to meet voters and members of party organizations and discuss changes needed with drought relief programs.⁷ Similarly, his son Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy conducted a 430-day padayatra from 2017 to 2019 with the goal of meeting 4.5 million families.⁸ These contemporary yatras, across parties and ideologies, underscore

⁶Times of India - Modi Kicks off Gujarat Gaurav Yatra

⁷Times of India - YSRs Padyatra to begin on April 9

⁸India Today - YS Jagan all set to embark on his 3000 KM long Padyatara in Andhra Pradesh

the enduring relevance of leader-led marches as a strategic tool in electoral politics.

Beyond the party-building components of yatras, the Bharat Jodo Yatra aimed to serve three strategic functions: to counter the perception of Congress as an elite and disconnected party by facilitating direct engagement with voters; to generate media attention and public visibility in a context where mainstream outlets favored the incumbent; and to signal electoral viability by challenging the narrative of inevitable defeat in a structurally imbalanced political arena.

4 Data and Empirical Approach

We examine the impact of leader-driven grassroots campaigns as an opposition party strategy against a populist incumbent by analyzing the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Specifically, our main analysis estimates the causal impact of the Yatra on electoral support for the Congress. Given our interest in both the promise and limits of this strategy, we focus on understanding the extent to which its impact is temporally and geographically bounded. In this section, we outline our data collection procedures and research design.

4.1 Bharat Jodo Yatra Route

The Indian National Congress formally announced the Bharat Jodo Yatra on August 23, 2023. The official social media account (Facebook and X/Twitter) of Bharat Jodo Yatra released a schedule of daily on-foot journeys by Rahul Gandhi. Figure 1 shows an example of a schedule for November 19, 2022. We manually mapped this daily schedule from September 7, 2022, to January 30, 2023, every day. The Yatra covered approximately 20 kilometers per day, with five to six designated stops each day. Because the Yatra followed major highways, we connected these stops to construct a continuous, 4,000+ kilometer route representing the Bharat Jodo Yatra. To ensure accuracy, we triangulated this route using three sources: contemporaneous newspaper reports, official social media feeds from the Congress party, and the live stream of the Yatra on YouTube to account for any changes based on what social media had initially put out. We then validated our constructed route with the Indian National Congress. We use this route to identify “treated” electoral constituencies or places where the yatra crossed. We identify treatment at the assembly constituency (AC) level for our main analysis. This is the smallest, electorally meaningful unit for party-based electoral politics.⁹

⁹Assembly constituencies are state-level electoral districts.



Figure 1: BGY Schedule Example

4.2 Congress Electoral Performance

Our goal is to examine the impact of the yatra on Congress electoral performance in the subsequent state and national elections. During the Bharat Jodo Yatra, Rahul Gandhi traveled across India between September 2022 and January 2023. In the period following the Yatra, state assembly elections were held in Karnataka (May 2023), Telangana, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh (all in December 2023), and Andhra Pradesh (May 2024). National parliamentary elections were conducted between April and June 2024.¹⁰ Figure 2 presents a timeline of the Yatra and the elections to facilitate visual interpretation of the temporal relationship between the Yatra and electoral outcomes.

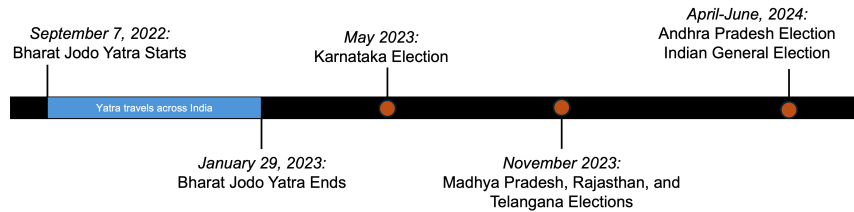


Figure 2: Timeline of BGY and Elections

State Assembly Election: The state assembly election results data for the states of Karnataka (2008, 2013, 2018), Madhya Pradesh (2008, 2013, 2018), Rajasthan (2008, 2013, 2018), Telangana (2009, 2014, 2018), and Andhra Pradesh (2009, 2014, 2019) are accessed from Trivedi Centre for Political Data (TCDP) (Agarwal et al. 2022). For the most recent elections—Karnataka (2023), Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana (2023), and Andhra

¹⁰Between the yatra and the 2024 national elections, there were also state elections in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Odisha; however, the yatra did not cross through any of these states.

Pradesh (2024)—we scraped official results from the Election Commission of India. We restrict our analysis to elections held after 2008, as earlier results are not comparable due to changes in constituency boundaries following delimitation.

National Election: We collect national election results at the assembly constituency level.¹¹ There are 543 Parliamentary constituencies in India and within these there are about 5-9 assembly constituencies (AC). Using AC-level results for the national elections allows us more fine-grained data to understand the impact of the yatra.¹² The AC level results for the Lok Sabha election give us votes polled by each candidate at the AC level from TCDP for the years 2009, 2014, and 2019 (Agarwal et al. 2022). For AC level results for 2024, we scrape, OCR and manually code the vote share for the Congress candidate for each assembly constituency from the election commission website for each state.¹³ As with our state-level analysis, we limit our focus to elections conducted after 2008 due to changes in constituency boundaries following delimitation.

4.3 Research Design

Our main empirical specification estimates the causal effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress electoral performance, measured by vote share at the assembly constituency (AC) level. We focus on Congress vote share as the primary outcome and report results on the probability of a Congress victory in the Appendix. The analysis relies on a standard difference-in-differences framework:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{BJY}_i \times \text{Post}_t) + \gamma_i + \theta_t + \delta_s \times t + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Y_{it} denotes vote share for Congress in constituency i during election year t . BJY_i dummy takes the value 1 if the yatra passes through constituency i . Post_t equals 1 if the election was held after the yatra. γ_i and θ_t are constituency and election year fixed effects, respectively. We include state-specific linear time trends indicated by $\delta_s \times t$ to account for state-level factors that might evolve differently over time in our analysis of the national elections which includes 27 states. We cluster our standard errors at the AC level, which is the level at which treatment is assigned. The coefficient of interest, β_1 , captures the average treatment effect of the yatra on INC vote share. Our identification strategy relies on the parallel trends

¹¹We do not have AC level data for the following states: Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh.

¹²In Appendix XX we also present results at the PC level.

¹³We use the Form 20 polling station results to determine the vote share for Congress in each AC.

assumption: in the absence of the yatra, treated and untreated constituencies would have experienced similar trends in Congress vote share. We assess the validity of this assumption by presenting an event study analysis in the results section. Figure 3 shows the BJY route and the treated and control constituencies for the state and national election analysis.

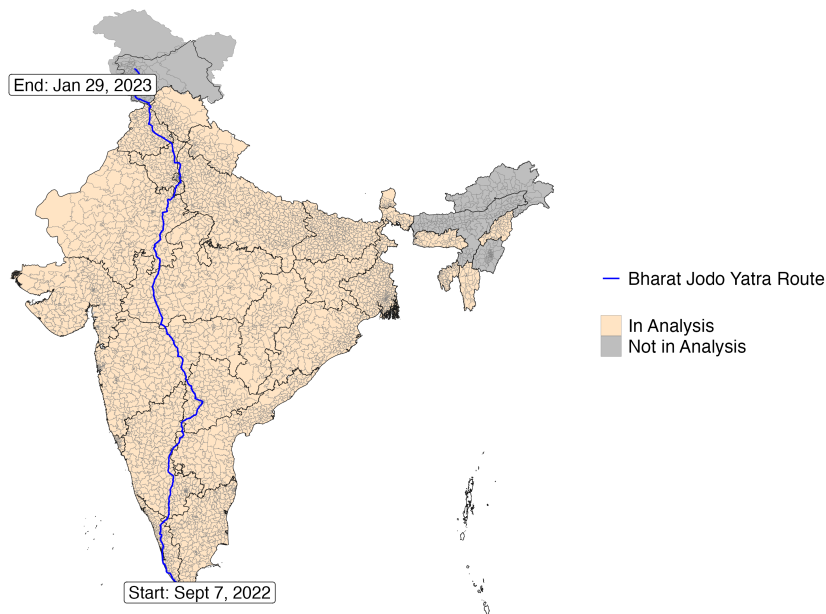


Figure 3: BJY Route and States in Analysis

5 The Electoral Impact of the Bharat Jodo Yatra

We test the impact of the yatra on the electoral outcomes for the Congress party in state and national elections. We focus on Congress vote share as our primary outcome; however, we report results related to the likelihood of a Congress win in Appendix B and A. We further collect polling station-level data from the first election after the yatra to examine the spatial limits of leader-driven grassroots campaigns.

5.1 State Elections

We estimate the effect of the yatra on state legislative assembly elections, concentrating on five states in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh where the yatra traversed and elections were held. We report the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share in Table 1. In Model 1, focusing on all five states, the yatra increased the INC's vote share by 3.39 percentage points, equivalent to an increase of about one-fifth

of a standard deviation. When disaggregating the analysis by the timing of elections, we find that the effect is concentrated in races held approximately seven months after the yatra passed through the state, namely, the Karnataka elections. By the time of the electoral races 11 months and onward after the election (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh elections), the estimated effects on Congress vote share are small and statistically insignificant. In Karnataka, constituencies traversed by the yatra experienced a 4.49 percentage point increase in INC vote share—representing a 12% gain relative to the state’s average Congress vote share. The event study in Figure 4 confirms the parallel trends assumption for the positive and statistically significant effects observed in elections held seven months after the yatra. In Appendix A we examine how the distance to the yatra (measured from the distance of the route to the centroid of a constituency) affects Congress vote in state elections.

Similar to the results in Table 1, we observe an aggregate effect for all state elections, primarily driven by the Karnataka state elections where the election were held 7 months after the yatra. In Karnataka the result suggests that greater distance from the yatra route is associated with lower Congress vote share. We also examine the impact of the yatra on the likelihood of the INC winning in a constituency in Appendix A. Again, we find an increased likelihood of a Congress win, an effect concentrated in the Karnataka sample. Across both sets of analyses, consistent with our findings on the vote share, we find no impact for the elections held 11 months or more after the yatra.

While the results suggest that the yatra had a positive impact on vote share for the Congress at the state level; the findings also highlight the temporal limits of leader-driven grassroots campaigns. The electoral effect of the campaign fades as more time elapses since the yatra.

Table 1: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in State Elections

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	all state elections	elections 7 months since yatra	elections 11-13 months since yatra	elections 19 months since yatra
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
BJY _i × Post _t	3.39*** (1.26)	4.49** (2.05)	−0.11 (1.44)	0.20 (0.89)
Observations	3747	891	2160	696
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	948	224	549	175
Mean of DV	32.29	38.38	36.57	11.24

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state.

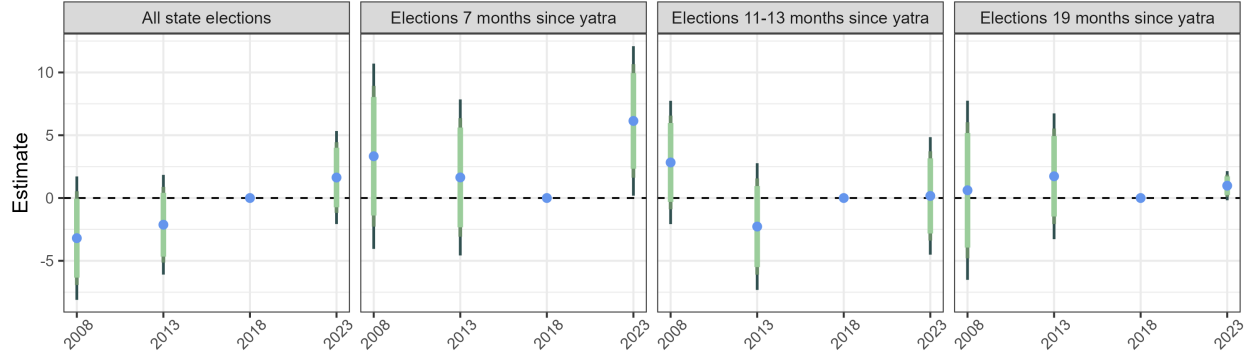


Figure 4: Effect on INC Vote Share in State Elections: Event Study

Notes: SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state. We standardize the years of the election to 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024, for all state to make it easier to read even though for Andhra Pradesh the elections were held in 2009, 2013, 2019, and 2024.

5.2 National Elections

We examine the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share in national elections, focusing on different subsets of constituencies. Our results from the state elections reveal that when elections occur over a year after the yatra, we do not see positive effects on Congress vote share. The national elections were held 15 to 19 months after the yatra crossed a state. Because of this temporal distance, it is unlikely that we will observe significant positive impacts of the yatra on Congress vote share. However, some constituencies may still exhibit lingering effects more than a year after the yatra.

In Table 2, we show the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share in national elections. First, examining all assembly constituencies, we find a small and statistically insignificant effect of the yatra on Congress vote share. One challenge in examining Congress vote share in national elections is the variation in alliance formations over time. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party contested separately from Congress in 2019, but in 2024 they formed a joint front as part of the INDIA alliance. To account for this, in Model 2, we restrict the sample to constituencies where Congress contested in all four elections. We again find no significant effect of the yatra on INC vote share. These findings are consistent with the expectation that the yatra's effect would diminish over time.

In 2024, the INDIA alliance between Congress and other prominent regional parties resulted in different seat-sharing agreements across states. In some states, Congress was the leading alliance party, contesting the majority of the seats. These states would be more likely

to have a longer-term effect of the yatra, given Congress’s central role in national politics there. In Models 3 and 4, we focus on states where Congress was the main alliance party against the BJP.¹⁴ In these states, we find that the yatra increased Congress’ vote share by 2.30 to 3.01 percentage points. The event study in Figure 5 supports the parallel trends assumption, reinforcing the credibility of the positive and statistically significant effects observed in models focused on Congress-led states.

Table 2: Effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	All States	Congress Always Contest	Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024)	Congress Strongholds States (2024)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$BJY_t \times Post_t$	0.29 (0.83)	0.53 (0.83)	3.01*** (0.98)	2.30** (0.94)
Observations	12328	8608	8132	7622
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	3743	2157	2123	1973
Mean of DV	30.66	34.33	33.69	34.04

Notes: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

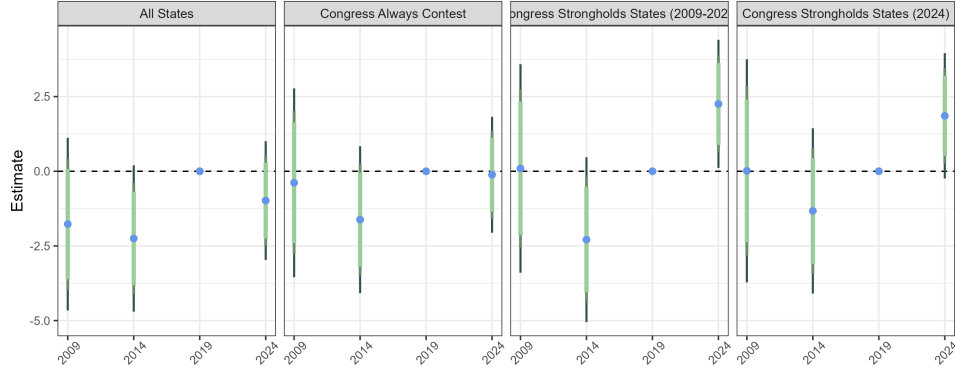


Figure 5: Event Study for 2024 National Election

In Appendix B, we present results at the parliamentary constituency level (each parliamentary constituency constitutes about 5-9 assembly constituencies). These results point

¹⁴We use two measures for if Congress was the main alliance party against the BJP. In Model 3, we measure this by focusing on states where the INC contested in above 80% of the constituencies for all four elections. This results in the following 20 states: Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Odisha, Puducherry, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Telangana, Tripura, and Uttarakhand. In Model 4, we measure this by focusing on states where the INC contested in above 80% of the constituencies for only the 2024 elections. This results in the following 18 states: Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Puducherry, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Telangana, and Uttarakhand.

in the same direction but are statistically insignificant, likely due to the coarser granularity of the treatment definition. In Appendix Appendix B we further examine the impact of distance to the yatra on Congress vote share in the national election, measured using both assembly and parliamentary constituency-level data. The results reveal similar patterns as we find in Table 2. The yatra has a small and often insignificant impact on Congress vote share across the national election and in places where Congress contested all four national election cycles. However, focusing on places where Congress was the key opposition alliance party, we find that as we move further from the yatra route, there is a significant decrease in INC vote share.

The results reveal that while overall the effect of the yatra dissipated by the time of the national elections, about a year and a half later, there is still an observable effect in places where Congress was the key opposition party against the BJP. The yatra platformed Congress leaders and the Congress party making its impact most likely in places where Congress, not other opposition parties, matters. This helps explain why we observe a positive effect on Congress vote share primarily in states where the INC regularly opposed the BJP on its own rather than relying heavily on alliance coalition partners. The impact of the leader-driven grassroots campaign appears limited to the party that mobilized voters, with little spillover to allied parties.

5.3 Detailed Study of the Karnataka State Elections

So far, the main analysis has considered an entire assembly constituency as treated by the yatra if the yatra crossed through it and the supplementary analysis looks at the distance to the yatra from the centroid of an assembly constituency. The average area of an Indian assembly constituency is approximately 900 square kilometers and the average number of voters per assembly constituency is 200,000. Given this scale, the current analysis uses an expansive definition of treatment. Therefore, we may be underestimating the effect of the yatra. To generate a precise estimate of the yatra on Congress vote share, we focus on the first state to hold an election after the yatra, Karnataka and analyze voting behavior at the most granular level available in administrative data, the polling station.

The Form 20 provides election results at the polling station level for all contesting candidates in India. On average, each polling station has approximately 900 voters. We scrape this data for the 2018 polling station-level results from the Karnataka Election Information System. The 2023 polling station-level results are only available in PDFs from the Chief Election Commissioner of Karnataka. We scrapped the PDF and OCR and then manually cleaned the data to map the candidate with their political party. We also retrieved a shapefile of polling stations in 2018 from the Karnataka Election Information System, which allows us

to examine the impact of the yatra spatially. Polling station serial numbers across time are not always the same so we take two approaches to matching these. First, we exact match on polling station numbers which provides the least conservative approach since the addition of new stations could lead to some re-numbering. This is referred to as the “Number-Matched Sample” and includes data on the over 100,000 polling stations in Karnataka. Second, we do an exact match on the name of the polling station (the name of a school and room number) which provides the most conservative approach. This is referred to as the “Exact Name-Matched Sample” and includes data on the over 57,000 polling stations in Karnataka that we are able to perfectly match. We provide further details on this process in Appendix C.

With these two samples, we estimate a range of models to examine how being proximate to the yatra route impacted Congress vote share. The results are shown in Table 3. In models 1 and 4 we use a standard two-period difference-in-differences model where we define a polling station as treated if the yatra crossed through an assembly constituency in which the station is located.¹⁵ We find that there is an 8.76-9.20 percentage point increase in Congress vote share in polling stations in assembly constituencies that the yatra crossed, reflecting about a 20% increase from the mean Congress vote share across both elections in Karnataka. In models 2 and 5, we again use a standard two-period difference-in-differences model; however, we defined a polling station as treated if the yatra crossed the area that the polling station covered.¹⁶ In polling stations that Rahul Gandhi crossed in Karnataka, we see a 10.59-13.63 percentage point increase in Congress vote share. Finally, in models 3 and 6, we use a continuous treatment of the log distance to the yatra route to examine how moving away from the yatra route impacted Congress vote share. We find that moving further away from the yatra decreased Congress vote share in the 2024 election compared to the 2018 election. To understand the impact, if we take two polling stations, one that is 10 kilometers from the yatra route and one that is 100 kilometers away, the further away polling station would be expected to have about a 6.22 percentage point lower Congress vote share. These results reveal larger effects than our aggregate results in the previous section; however, because we focus on the first state to hold elections after the yatra, this provides the most likely case to find an effect.

The final set of analyses that examines how the effect of the yatra on Congress vote share decreases with distance assumes a linear effect of distance on vote share. This means that moving from 0 km to 1 km away is considered similar to moving from 300 km to 301 km away, which may not accurately reflect reality. To address this issue, we apply a method

¹⁵The percent of treated polling stations is 8.5% in the Number-Matched Sample and 7.7% in the Exact Name-Matched Sample.

¹⁶The percent of treated polling stations is 0.082% in the Number-Matched Sample and 0.78% in the Exact Name-Matched Sample.

Table 3: Effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections

	DV: Congress Vote Share					
	Number-Matched Sample			Exact Name-Matched Sample		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
$BJY(AC)_i \times Post_t$	9.20*** (2.57)			8.76*** (2.28)		
$BJY(PS)_i \times Post_t$		10.59*** (1.02)			13.63*** (1.65)	
$Log(Dist \text{ to } BGY)_i \times Post_t$			-2.44*** (0.10)			-2.77*** (0.13)
Treatment Definition	Route Crosses AC	Route Crosses PS	Distance to Route	Route Crosses AC	Route Crosses PS	Distance to Route
Observations	105796	105796	105796	57606	57606	57606
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Polling Station FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	224	57300	57300	205	34467	34467
Mean of DV	41.1	41.1	41.1	41.25	41.25	41.25

Notes: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 elections.

developed by (Butts 2021), which divides the sample into distance quantiles, as outlined by (Cattaneo et al. 2024; Cattaneo, Farrell and Feng 2020). The effect is then estimated non-parametrically within each bin by comparing units before and after treatment. The estimated effect from the most distant bin is subtracted from the others to normalize the results. This approach allows for a data-driven and optimal selection of the number and location of bins, minimizing the risk of researcher bias. Unlike the conventional ad-hoc selection of treatment and control rings, this estimator prevents the selection of rings that might unintentionally produce exaggerated or negligible effects.

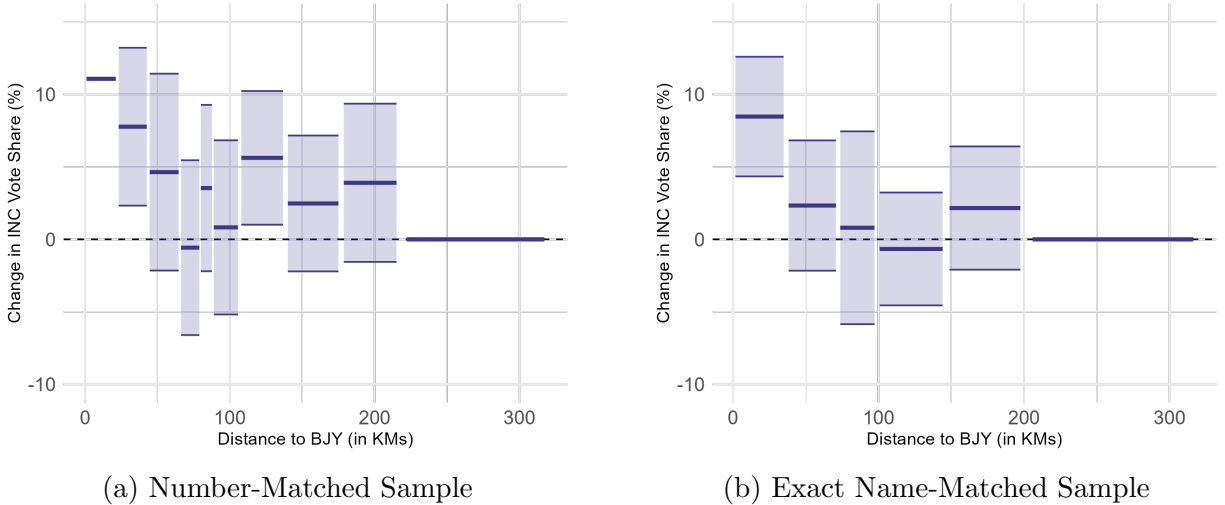


Figure 6: The effect of distance on INC vote share

The results from this analysis are visualized in Figure 6. The figure reveals that the

positive effects of the yatra on INC vote share are concentrated within about 50 kilometers of the yatra. We interpret this finding as suggesting that the effect of the yatra is likely to come from some direct interaction with the march. In fact, across all of our analysis, our design assumes that there is something critical about experiencing the yatra, beyond just hearing about it more broadly. If we believe that news about the yatra reached the country overall, then each design estimates the impact of a more direct experience with the yatra.

6 How Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns Can Help the Opposition

Our results demonstrate that grassroots campaigns by the Indian National Congress’s leader Rahul Gandhi during the Bharat Jodo Yatra increased INC vote share in a limited way, ultimately mattering for elections that were temporally proximate, geographically close to the yatra route, and for the party organizing the yatra itself. We now turn to understanding how these campaigns can help the opposition. Our theoretical argument highlights the role of leader-driven grassroots campaigns in addressing key weaknesses that opposition parties face when competing against populist parties. To understand how this works for the INC’s yatra, we present evidence from interviews with Congress party leaders and workers, grassroots organizations, and voters, primarily in Karnataka, seven months after the election, alongside additional quantitative analysis. The evidence highlights that leader-driven grassroots campaigns allow the opposition to counter the narrative of being elite, reach voters in a pro-incumbent environment, and improve perceptions of their electoral viability.

6.1 Countering the Elite Narrative

The yatra helped Congress address its branding as an elite party. During the rise of the BJP under Modi, the party used populist rhetoric to frame the Congress as elite relative to the BJP, which was portrayed as connected to the masses (Varshney, Ayyangar and Swaminathan 2021; Leidig and Mudde 2023; Naseemullah and Chhibber 2024). This is clear in Modi’s emphasis on being a tea seller, in contrast to the opposition’s dynastic politics. Many accounts of the yatra highlighted how Gandhi’s one-on-one engagement with voters, where he listened to their concerns and interacted with them on their terms, helped reshape his public image. One voter described the effort to connect: “Rahul Gandhi walked and listened to our problems.”¹⁷ Other voters highlighted how the idea of walking across the entire country made them see Gandhi as less elite and willing to endure hardship. One voter

¹⁷Author interview with voter. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

said it was impactful to “see a party leader walking and doing this hardship”¹⁸ while another emphasized that “everyday when Rahul Gandhi walked people were thinking whether he would have the capacity to do the entire thing and he then he did.”¹⁹ The yatra further addressed the perception of Rahul Gandhi as an elite dynast with one Congress worker emphasizing that “the yatra showed people that [he] was not just inheriting power.”²⁰ Rahul Gandhi has regularly faced criticism from the opposition for being an ineffective leader, often derided as “Pappu.” In places that experienced the yatra, voters claimed that “fewer people would refer to Rahul Gandhi as Pappu” stating that they “could no longer attack him like that after he walked across the entire country to meet them.”²¹

After the yatra, Gandhi and the party regularly invoked this grassroots connection to pitch the ideological position of the Congress party. During the yatra, Gandhi’s interaction with one voter - who described Gandhi’s effort as “a shop of love in a marketplace of hate” (*nafrat ke bazaar mein mohabbat ki dukaan*) was repeatedly used by the party as their ideological counterpoint to the BJP’s politics. In recounting this moment in later speeches, Gandhi emphasized that this slogan originated from his direct engagement with voters at the grassroots.

6.2 Reaching Voters in a Pro-Incumbent Environment

The yatra provided Congress with a way to reach voters in the face of media environment dominated by pro-incumbent bias. The ruling government cracked down on media that criticized it the leveraged a range tactics to promote pro-government content (Bhat 2023). Moreover, (Tudor 2023) notes that “harassment of independent journalism and concentrating ownership structures have meant that journalists and individuals practice a high degree of self-censorship.” This created an environment that would be a significant challenge for any opposition party to break through.

The yatra provided an opportunity to gain coverage and engage voters directly. Party workers highlighted that a diverse set of media covered Congress during the yatra. One member of the Congress team explained that “the alternative media started covering the yatra because the mainstream media was not covering it as well” and this “created a buzz” in which “people viewed Congress as different than before.”²² The spectacle of the yatra further boosted voters’ interest, prompting many to seek out more information. One elected Congress legislator highlighted that the fact that Gandhi was walking across the country

¹⁸ Author interview with voter. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

¹⁹ Author interview with voter. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

²⁰ Author interview with Congress team member. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

²¹ Author interview with Congress team member. January 10, 2024. Mysore District.

²² Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

“increased curiosity among voters to learn more about why he was walking.”²³

One observable implication for this mechanism would be increased political interest in topics related to the yatra, Rahul Gandhi, and Congress. We test this using data from Google Trends, which researchers use to capture average internet search patterns among defined populations over time and space (Dancy and Fariss 2024). We collect search behavior for the following topics: Bharat Jodo Yatra, Rahul Gandhi, Indian National Congress, Narendra Modi, and Bharatiya Janata Party.²⁴ Google Trends does not provide raw search totals; instead, it offers data that have already been transformed using min-max normalization from 0 to 100. The dependent variable will take a value of 100 when the maximum ratio of BJY topic searches to all Google searches is at the maximum and 0 when it is at the minimum. We collect daily data for all Indian states from September 6, 2022, to January 31, 2023, from one day before the BJY began to one day after it ended.

We examine the effect of the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Google searches using an event study at the state-day level. This analysis tests the dynamic treatment effects of the yatra entering a state on political interest in a search topic. Given the staggered timing of the yatra’s entry into each state, we use the approach developed by (Callaway and Sant’Anna 2021) for staggered difference-in-differences to estimate an event study, assessing how search interest changes in the days following the yatra’s entry. The results are displayed in Figure 7. When the yatra entered a state, we observe a large increase in search interest for the Bharat Jodo Yatra and Rahul Gandhi, and a smaller increase for the Indian National Congress in the days following entry. For each of these terms, interest levels return to pre-yatra baselines approximately 15–20 days later. We find no impact of the yatra on political interest in Narendra Modi or the BJP. In Appendix D, we report the difference-in-difference estimates for each search topic. The results show a large, statistically significant effect on interest in the BJY and Rahul Gandhi, a smaller significant effect for the INC, and no detectable effect for Modi or the BJP. We interpret these findings as evidence that the yatra generated increased demand for information about the movement, the leader, and the party, despite the challenges traditionally faced by the opposition in a pro-incumbent media environment.

²³ Author interview with Congress MLA. January 9, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

²⁴ These Google Trends Topics include a group of terms that share the same concept in any language. This ensures we capture the entire search pattern on the Google platform regardless of which language or similar wording is used to look for it.

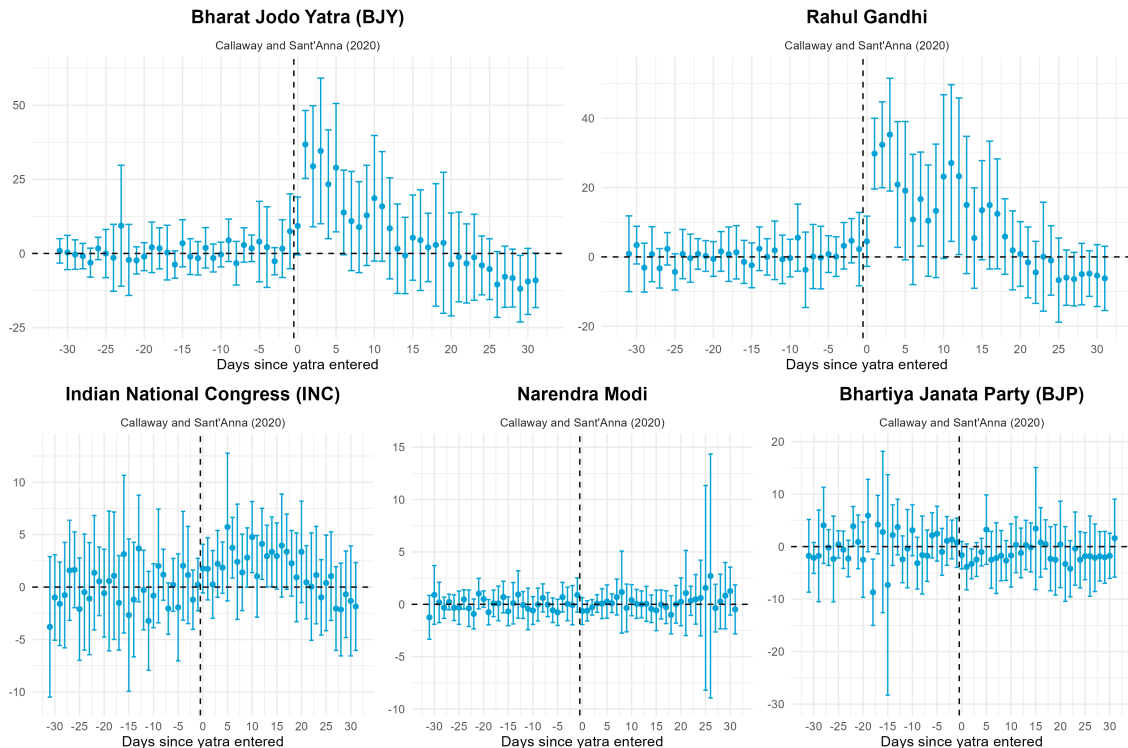


Figure 7: Impacts of BJY on Google Search Outcomes

6.3 Improving Perceptions of Viability

The yatra improved the perception of Congress’ viability despite the tilt in the electoral playing field. While the focus on India’s democratic challenges has centered on the BJP’s erosion of liberal democratic credentials, there have also been difficulties in the realm of electoral democracy, including increasing deference of the Election Commission to the executive (Vaishnav 2024a), a shift from earlier norms (Sridharan and Vaishnav 2017), reduced transparency in election financing through the use of electoral bonds (Vaishnav 2024b), and legal troubles for regional opposition leaders. These can lead voters to perceive incumbent victory as inevitable and diminish opposition viability.

Interviews with voters in areas that experienced the yatra revealed how it changed the discourse around Congress, making the party appear more viable. One voter described how on a “mass level the impression of the party went up” and that “people seemed more likely to accept the Congress.”²⁵ This perception was shared by Congress party workers as well, a local Congress party worker in Mandya district, Karnataka, where the yatra passed, described how party membership increased: “after the yatra the members doubled”²⁶, especially we had

²⁵ Author interview with Congress team member. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

²⁶ We were unable to verify this but it reflects a perception that party elites noticed an increase in mem-

many youth joining the party.”²⁷

Improved perceptions of viability were also linked to the view that the yatra presented the Congress party as a united front against the incumbent. Across interviews, the yatra was described as an effort to unite factions within the party and project a cohesive image to voters. In Karnataka, Congress Party workers highlighted how two senior Congress leaders representing different factions within the party walked together hand-in-hand with Rahul Gandhi during the yatra. He described that “when DK [Shivakumar] and Siddaramaiah were walking together, it neutralized allegations of infighting in the Congress.”²⁸ In fact, a large poster of Rahul Gandhi walking hand in hand with DK Shivakumar and Siddaramaiah was still displayed outside the Congress office building 15 months after the yatra had left Karnataka. The yatra showed that that party was united and internal factions would not limit its viability, especially considering the history of factional politics in the Congress (Brass 1965; Kochanek 1968; Nellis 2016).

By helping to build party organization in areas where the yatra passed, it also increased Congress’s visibility and viability. One member of the Congress team who supported Rahul Gandhi during the Karnataka leg described how the yatra provided the party workers an opportunity to “interact with Rahul Gandhi and get pictures with him” contributing to “cadre-based enthusiasm” where “the workers felt like this was the moment for the party.”²⁹ This reinvigorated party organization could be expected to contribute to greater mobilization. One observable implication is an increase in rallies in yatra constituencies in the lead-up to the 2024 elections.

Using data on campaign rallies by the BJP (with Narendra Modi or Amit Shah) and by Congress (with Rahul Gandhi or Priyanka Gandhi), we examine whether yatra constituencies hosted more INC rallies.³⁰ Figure 8 shows that BJY parliamentary constituencies had nearly double the share of Congress rallies (35%) compared to non-BJY constituencies (18%) ahead of the 2024 national elections. There is no significant difference for the BJP. While it is possible that yatra constituencies were electorally strategic for Congress leading both to their selection for the yatra and the subsequent rallies, it is also plausible that the organizational capacity built during the yatra helped facilitate future mobilization.

The follow-up rallies during the 2024 elections also help explain the positive effect of the yatra on INC vote share in places where Congress was the key alliance party. Disaggregating the rallies in BJY constituencies by those in states where Congress was the key alliance party

bership

²⁷ Author interview with Congress team member. January 9, 2024. Mandya District

²⁸ Author interview with Congress team member. January 8, 2024. Bangalore Urban District.

²⁹ Author interview with Congress team member. January 7, 2024. Bangalore Urban District

³⁰ The location of rallies was collected by a reporter from the *Times of India* and used by Verma and Pratikshit (2024)

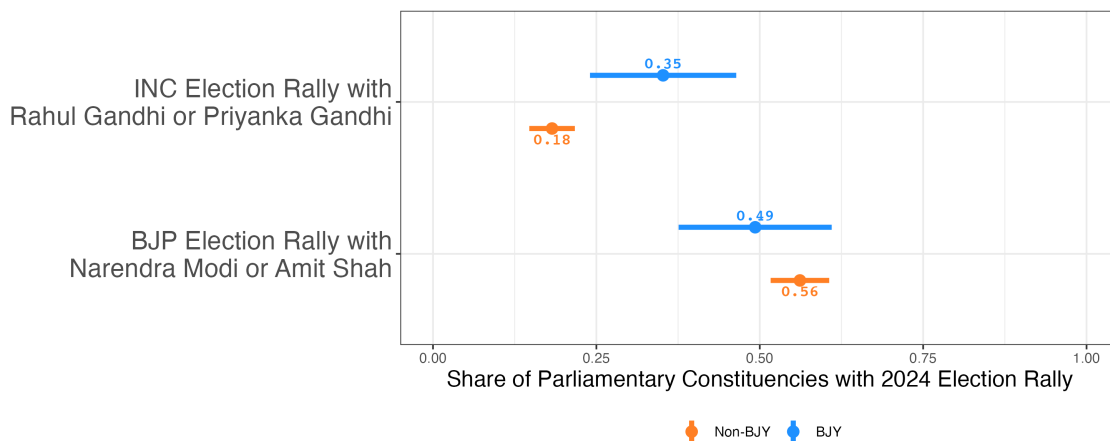


Figure 8: BJP and Congress Election Campaign Rallies in BJP and non-BJP Constituencies

compared to those where they were not shows that rallies are more likely in the Congress stronghold states, with 42% of them experiencing a 2024 election rally.

In sum, interview evidence, Google Trends analysis, and descriptive rally data suggest that the yatra increased Congress vote share by addressing particular challenges faced by the opposition in confronting a populist incumbent. The Bharat Jodo Yatra helped counter the elite narrative, reach voters in a pro-incumbent environment, and improve perceptions of the party’s viability.

7 How Leader-Driven Grassroots Campaigns Impact Voters

We now turn to examining the individual-level dynamics of leader-driven grassroots campaigns. While our earlier analysis focused on aggregate electoral outcomes and changes in opposition support, it did not address which individuals engage with such campaigns or how these efforts influence them directly. To investigate these questions, we conducted an original telephone survey of 3,510 citizens. The survey was administered by CVoter, an Indian public opinion research firm, in January 2024, approximately seven months after the yatra passed through Karnataka and eleven months after it passed through Madhya Pradesh. CVoter added the questions to regular omnibus surveys that use random digit dialing. CVoter provides post-stratification weights to achieve representativeness on age, gender, education, income, social group, and rurality for each state. In all of our analyses, we use these weights.

In Karnataka, we surveyed 420 respondents in 20 assembly constituencies where the yatra passed and 896 respondents across a random sample of 40 assembly constituencies where the yatra did not pass through. In Madhya Pradesh, we surveyed 965 respondents across 18

assembly constituencies where the yatra passed and 1,229 respondents across a random sample of 42 assembly constituencies where the yatra did not pass through. Appendix E includes a map of our survey coverage and demographic details of our sample. Stratifying the sample on places that the yatra did and did not cross allowed us to obtain enough respondents who could have participated directly in the yatra.

7.1 Participants of the Yatra

In our survey, 24% of respondents reported participating in the yatra in some way (e.g. attending an event or side meeting, walking with the march). Table 9 shows the demographic and political characteristics of yatra participants compared to non-participants. We do not observe significant differences in gender, age, income, and education between yatra participants and non-participants. This suggests that leader-driven grassroots mobilization is not confined to particular vote demographics, but rather has a broad-ranging impact. We do, however, find that rural respondents made up a greater share of yatra participants. This is likely a consequence of the yatra traveling through rural parts of the country and rural voters being more likely to attend when a rally comes to their area, a sentiment reflected in our interviews as well. In terms of social groups, yatra participants were slightly more likely to include Scheduled Castes and Tribes; however, there are no significant differences for other social groups.

Looking at the party that voters reported supporting in 2019 which they were asked about earlier in the survey, we can understand the political reach of the yatra. As expected, Congress voters made up a larger share of yatra participants (55%) than non-participants (28%) and BJP voters make up a lower share of yatra participants (40%) than non-participants (60%). Importantly, 17% of respondents who reported voting for the BJP in 2019 also participated in the yatra, suggesting that leader-driven campaigns can extend beyond core supporters to engage potential swing voters. At the same time, among Congress supporters, 39% participated in the yatra. This engagement across both groups suggests that leader-driven grassroots campaigns can assist opposition parties in reaching both core and swing voters (Cox and McCubbins 1986; Dixit and Londregan 1996).

7.2 The Impact of Yatra Participation

We study the impact of the yatra on individual voter perceptions, political engagement, and voting behavior through a cross-sectional analysis of survey data. First, we ask standard questions about attitudes towards Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party.³¹ Next, we

³¹These questions are similar to other questions that CVoter has fielded in their Omnibus survey in the past.

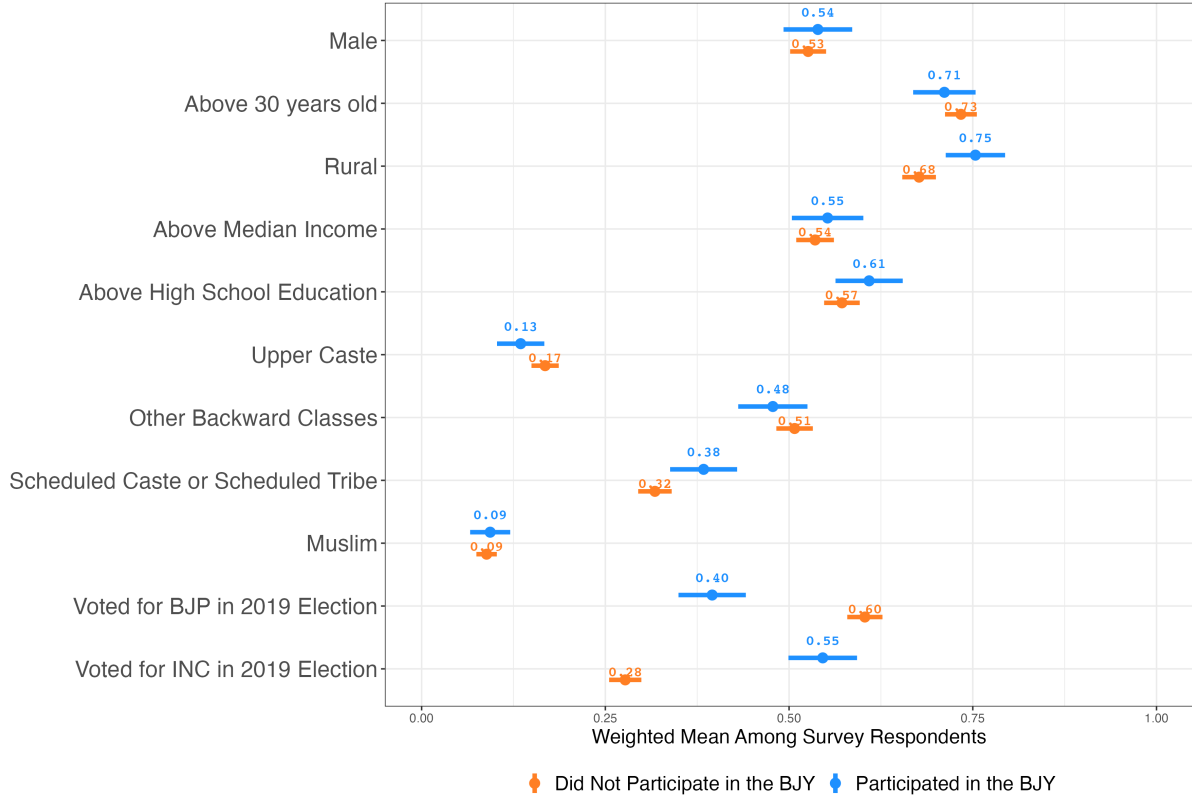


Figure 9: Demographic Characteristics of Yatra Participants

measure perceptions of party unity and engagement with both the Congress and the BJP. Engagement metrics include attending a rally, being contacted by a party worker, and engaging in discourse about the party leader, measured through conversations with neighbors or exposure to media (television or phone) Finally, we ask respondents to report their vote choice in the 2023 state elections and their current vote intention if an election were held today. More details on the survey questions are included in Appendix E.

Our analysis investigates the relationship between participation in the yatra and voter attitudes, engagement, and electoral behavior. In Figure 10, we present the effects for each outcome variable across four samples of the survey data. First, across the full sample of all respondents, we find that participating in the yatra improved perceptions of Congress and Rahul Gandhi, increased engagement with INC, and discourse about Rahul Gandhi. We find small and insignificant effects of yatra participation on any outcomes to BJP perceptions, engagement, or discourse. In terms of voting, yatra participants are more likely to report having voted for the INC in the 2023 state elections, less likely to report having voted for the BJP in both elections, and more likely to vote for the Congress today. We find consistent patterns among subgroups: respondents who voted for the BJP in 2019 and those who

voted for Congress in 2019. Among INC voters, the effect sizes are positive but smaller in magnitude, likely because these voters already held favorable views of the party and were predisposed to support it.

To further isolate the effect of direct participation, we restrict the sample to only those respondents in assembly constituencies through which the yatra passed and compare participants with non-participants. The effects remain strong and statistically significant, suggesting that participation itself, rather than merely being in a yatra-visited area, drives changes in political attitudes and behavior. This is consistent with earlier findings from polling station-level data, where more granular definitions of “treatment” yielded stronger effects than broader constituency-level classifications.

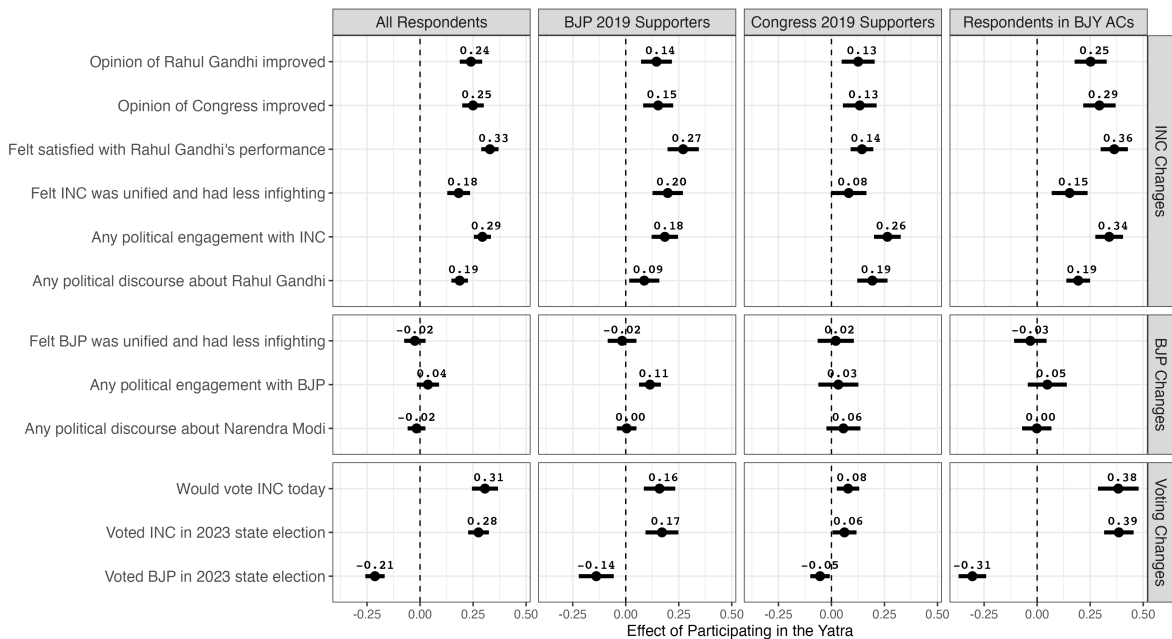


Figure 10: Effect of Participating in the Yatra

Taken together, these descriptive results suggest that participation in the yatra is not demographically constrained. Moreover, the results suggest that participation in the Bharat Jodo Yatra had lasting impacts on voter perceptions, engagement, and vote choice, highlighting the crucial role of direct connections with leader-driven campaigns.

8 Conclusion

The most decisive way to defeat a populist incumbent is at the ballot box. However, opposition political parties face an uphill battle in doing so. Populists frame the opposition as out of touch with voters, shape the environment to make it difficult for the opposition

to break through to voters, and influence the electoral space to present the opposition as nonviable given the populist’s dominance. In the face of these challenges, we argue that the opposition can adopt leader-driven grassroots campaigns to take on the populist at the ballot box. Opposition parties across contexts have taken this strategy in response to populists, especially those engaging in democratic erosion. In 2017 in Turkey, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu led the Justice March against backsliding by the Erdoğan regime. In 2020 in Tanzania, Freeman Mbowe led a walking rally for the Chadema party against the ruling CCM party. In 2025 in Hungary, Peter Magayar led the One Million Steps for Peace and National Unity march in response to democratic backsliding by Orban.

We examine the impact of these leader-driven grassroots campaigns by focusing on Congress Party Leader Rahul Gandhi’s Bharat Jodo Yatra. Using a difference-in-differences design to study state and national elections, we find that the yatra increased Congress vote share but these effects were limited in several key ways. The effects are concentrated in elections temporally proximate to the yatra, in places spatially nearby to the yatra route, and for the party that was at the center of the yatra. Interviews and additional descriptive analysis reveal that the campaign countered the narrative of Congress as an elite party, allowed the opposition to break through in a pro-incumbent environment, and improved perceptions of the party’s viability. Individual-level survey evidence reveals that participating in the yatra led to impacts on perceptions and engagement with the opposition one year later, highlighting that interacting with the leader-driven grassroots campaign was crucial to its impact.

The findings should also be interpreted in the context of the Congress Party’s electoral performance in the 2024 general elections. The election marked the first time in 10 years that the ruling BJP did not win an outright majority without its alliance partners. The Congress party performed better than expected for a range of reasons such as their ability to form a wide-ranging alliance with regional parties, their new ideological pitch with a bend toward justice, and their management of the internal party organization (Verma and Pratikshit 2024). This paper demonstrates that the Bharat Jodo Yatra also played a role in improving Congress’ electoral performance in the general elections in states where Congress was the key party in the INDIA alliance.

Zooming out from India, the findings suggest that leader-driven campaigns can help the opposition in challenging a populist incumbent electorally. However, these campaigns are not a panacea. Their effectiveness is both geographically and temporally constrained, and they are less impactful in areas where the campaigning party is not the primary face of the opposition. Importantly, increasing the frequency or expanding the reach of such campaigns does not necessarily enhance their effectiveness. Instead, their influence may lie partly in

their novelty and the spectacle they create for the opposition. Still, these campaigns have a lasting influence on voters who engage directly with them so as opposition parties take on leader-driven grassroots campaigns, they can improve the impact by mobilizing voters to participate in them.

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A Robustness and Additional Results for State Elections

Table A.1: Effect of Distance to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Win in State Elections

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	all state elections	elections 7 months since yatra	elections 11-13 months since yatra	elections 19 months since yatra
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$\text{Log}(\text{Dist to BJY})_i \times \text{Post}_t$	-1.65*** (0.29)	-1.20** (0.59)	0.26 (0.32)	0.37 (0.32)
Observations	3747	891	2160	696
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
PC/AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	948	224	549	175
Mean of DV	32.29	38.38	36.57	11.24

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state.

Table A.2: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Win in State Elections

	DV: Congress Win			
	all state elections	elections 7 months since yatra	elections 11-13 months since yatra	elections 19 months since yatra
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$\text{BJY}_i \times \text{Post}_t$	0.12** (0.06)	0.18* (0.10)	0.07 (0.07)	0.001 (0.07)
Observations	3784	893	2195	696
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	948	224	549	175
Mean of DV	0.34	0.47	0.34	0.15

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Karnataka elections were held 7 months after the yatra crossed the state, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana elections were held 11-13 months after the yatra crossed their states, and Andhra Pradesh elections were held 19 months after the yatra crossed the state.

B Robustness and Additional Results National Election Results

Table B.1: Effect of Yatra on INC Vote Share in National Elections (PC-Level)

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	All States	Congress Always Contest	Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024)	Congress Strongholds States (2024)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$BJY_i \times Post_t$	-0.55 (1.38)	-0.05 (1.34)	2.46 (1.61)	1.53 (1.52)
Observations	1598	1084	925	900
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
PC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (PC)	501	271	239	232
Mean of DV	28.93	33.81	32.99	33.15

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table B.2: Effect of Yatra on INC Win in National Elections (PC-Level)

	DV: Congress WIN			
	All States	Congress Always Contest	Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024)	Congress Strongholds States (2024)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$BJY_i \times Post_t$	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	0.001 (0.04)
Observations	4183	2162	1904	1848
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
PC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (PC)	529	271	239	232
Mean of DV	0.09	0.15	0.11	0.12

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table B.3: Effect of Distance to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections (PC-Level)

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	All States	Congress Always Contest	Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024)	Congress Strongholds States (2024)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$\text{Log}(\text{Dist to BJY})_i \times \text{Post}_t$	-0.09 (0.53)	0.03 (0.55)	-1.31** (0.62)	-0.77 (0.62)
Observations	1598	1084	925	900
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (PC)	501	271	239	232
Mean of DV	28.93	33.81	32.99	33.15

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the assembly constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 election

Table B.4: Effect Distance to the Bharat Jodo Yatra on Congress Vote Share in National Elections (AC-Level)

	DV: Congress Vote Share			
	All States	Congress Always Contest	Congress Strongholds States (2009-2024)	Congress Strongholds States (2024)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$\text{Log}(\text{Dist to BJY})_i \times \text{Post}_t$	-0.85*** (0.20)	-0.66*** (0.20)	-1.94*** (0.23)	-1.30*** (0.23)
Observations	12328	8608	8132	7622
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
PC/AC FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Number of Clusters (AC)	3743	2157	2123	1973
Mean of DV	30.66	34.33	33.69	34.04

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the parliamentary constituency level. Model 1 includes all constituencies for the state that we cover. Model 2 subsets to only constituencies where Congress contested in all 4 elections, Model 3 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats across all 4 elections. Model 4 focuses on states where Congress contested in 80% or more of the seats in the 2024 election

C Karnataka Polling Station Data

We provide full details on the scraping and processing of our Karnataka polling station data. Form 20 provides election results at the polling station level for all contesting candidates in India. On average, each polling station has approximately 900 voters. There were 56,994 polling stations in the 2018 Karnataka assembly election. We scrape the data for the 2018 polling station-level results from the Karnataka Election Information System.³² The website gives polling station-level votes for each candidate. We then manually mapped candidates to their political party using the state election data from TCPD. Due to some missingness, we have 54,433 polling stations in our data out of 56,994 in 2018. The data for the 2023 assembly election for the state of Karnataka is only available in PDF format on the website of the Chief Election Commissioner of Karnataka³³. We scrapped the PDF and OCR and then manually cleaned the data to map the candidate with their political party.³⁴ In our data, we have 47,898 out of 58,282 polling stations in 2023.

The Form 20 polling station electoral data for Karnataka for 2018 and 2023 only mentions the assembly constituency number and polling station serial number. However, the polling station numbers do not necessarily remain the same for 2018 and 2023. For example, the number of polling stations has increased by 1,288 from 2018 to 2023. To overcome this challenge, we take the most conservative path and match the polling station over time using the name of the polling station. We obtained the names of 56,653 (out of 56,994) polling stations for 2018 Form 20 from online resources from Gaurav Sood who scrapped the polling station across India in 2018. The names of 58,198 (out of 58,282) polling stations for the 2023 elections were scrapped from Karnataka Election Information System.

We fuzzy-match polling stations using the names for 2018 and 2023. We iterate over all assembly constituencies one by one and successfully match over 50% of the polling stations. To verify our match, we look at the correlation between polling station numbers in 2018 and 2023, as only a small fraction of polling stations changed their numbers, the polling station serial number for the vast majority should remain the same. The correlation for the names matched without a single difference in a name string is 99.24% while for names matched with at most 10 character difference in the name is 97.3%. Right now, this is the most conservative approach to matching.

³²Karnataka Election Information, last accessed on 6th Aug 2024

³³Karnataka CEO, last accessed on 6th Aug 2024

³⁴Note that many of these websites are only accessible in India or with a VPN.

D Google Trends

Table D.1 shows the difference-in-difference effect of the yatra entering a state on daily Google trends searches.

Table D.1: Effect Bharat Jodo Yatra on Daily Google Search Rate

	DV: Search Popularity Index				
	BJY	Rahul Gandhi	INC	Narendra Modi	BJP
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
BJY _{<i>i</i>} x Post _{<i>t</i>}	46.49*** (6.73)	45.32*** (3.19)	3.91*** (1.24)	0.32 (0.70)	2.92* (1.52)
Observations	4144	4144	4440	4884	4588
State FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mean of DV	8.65	16.06	12.88	6.31	14.4

Notes: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. SEs clustered at the state level.

E Survey Details and Additional Results

Our telephone survey was conducted in Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. Figure E.1 shows the ACs that we have survey respondents in.

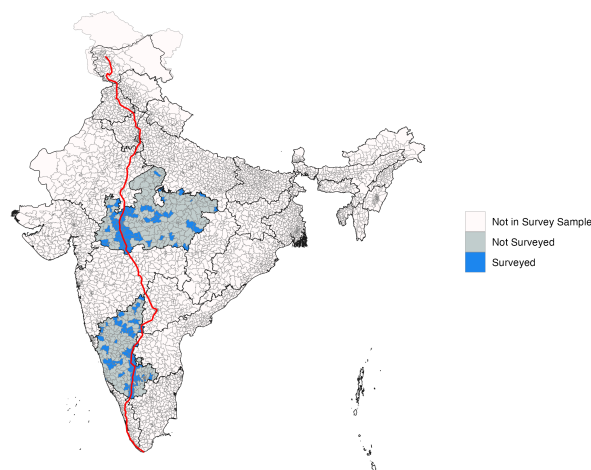


Figure E.1: Map of ACs in our Survey Data

We focus on 4 different subsets of respondents:

- All respondents
- BJP 2019 supporters: those who reported that they voted for the BJP when asked which party they supported in the 2019 Lok Sabha election
- INC 2019 supporters: those who reported that they voted for the INC when asked which party they supported in the 2019 Lok Sabha election
- BJY ACs respondents: those who were in assembly constituencies that they yatra passed through

We look at several outcome variables from the survey. Here we list each question for the outcomes.

- How has your opinion of Rahul Gandhi been in the past year - improved, stayed the same, worsened, don't know / can't say
- How has your opinion of the Congress Party been in the past year - improved, stayed the same, worsened, don't know / can't say

- How satisfied are you with the performance of Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi in the past year - very much satisfied, satisfied to some extent, not at all satisfied, don't know / can't say
- In the past year, did you feel that the INC was unified and had less infighting - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political engagement with INC (did at least one of the following):
 - Receive any political messages from Congress by phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Attend a Congress political meeting or election rally - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Get contacted by a party worker from Congress - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Attended a rally by a state leader - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political discourse about Rahul Gandhi (did at least one of the following)
 - Heard Rahul Gandhi discussed on television/phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Discussed Rahul Gandhi with neighbors - yes, no, don't know, refused
- In the past year, did you feel that the BJP was unified and had less infighting - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political engagement with BJP (did at least one of the following):
 - Receive any political messages from BJP by phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Attend a BJP political meeting or election rally - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Get contacted by a party worker from BJP - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Attended a rally by a state leader - yes, no, don't know, refused
- Any political discourse about Narendra Modi (did at least one of the following)
 - Heard Narendra Modi discussed on television/phone - yes, no, don't know, refused
 - Discussed Narendra Modi with neighbors - yes, no, don't know, refused
- If the Lok Sabha election was held today, which party would you vote for?
- Which party did you vote for in the 2023 Vidhan Sabha election?