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Hindu Nationalist Organizations and India's Democratic Erosion

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Abstract

While a dense network of civil society organizations has commonly been regarded to enhance democracy, this thesis seeks to explore how Hindu nationalist civil society organizations influence autocratization in India. Since the BJP and Narendra Modi got to power in a watershed election in 2014 and was re-elected with an even larger mandate in 2019, Indian liberal democracy has seen decline. I contribute to the literatures of democratic backsliding and social capital by developing a framework for seeing parties and civil society organizations as movements that may work together and contribute to democratic backsliding. I argue that Hindu nationalist civil society organizations' increased service provision directed at disadvantaged segments of society has contributed to democratic backsliding by way of building trust, ideologically convincing and swaying votes in favor of the BJP, leading disadvantaged segments of society to increasingly vote for the BJP.

Analyzing this through process tracing, using scholarly literature, news articles and the movement's own sources, I contend that service provision likely did contribute to democratic backsliding in India through this mechanism. These organizations seem to attempt to build trust through organizing their services to adapt to local needs and appear apolitical. The organizations furthermore appear to use education to disseminate Hindu nationalist values to students and wider communities and conduct "awareness campaigns" to subtly sway votes in favor of the BJP. We then observed how disadvantaged segments of society increasingly voted for the BJP in the 2014 and in the 2019 elections. While there are many reasons for the BJP's success, particularly the "Modi factor", disadvantaged segments of society's support for this elitist party is particularly puzzling, which this thesis contributes to explaining.

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Abbreviations

BJP   Bharatiya Janata Party

CSO   Civil society organization

NSDAP   National Socialist German Workers' Party

RSS   Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

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1. Introduction

While India's democracy has always had its challenges, there is agreement that liberal democracy has significantly deteriorated since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained power nationally in 2014 under prime minister Narendra Modi (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022; Chidambaram, 2022; Chowdhury & Keane, 2021; Ganguly, 2019; Varshney, 2019). Under Modi, Indian media, academia and civil society have come under increasing pressure (Bajpai & Kureshi, Ganguly, 2019; Varshney, 2019). Dissent has largely been cracked down upon by use of draconian laws (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Ganguly, 2019, p. 83; Ganguly, 2020, p. 193; Varshney, 2019, p. 73). The judiciary has also become less independent, leading justices to publicly voice their concern of executive interference (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Ganguly, 2021, p. 180; Khosla & Vaishnav, 2021; Varshney, 2019, pp. 73-74). And while India has seen a number of Hindu-Muslim riots, there has been a surge in vigilante violence directed at Muslims, which the Modi government has failed to adequately address (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Chidambaram, 2022, p. 101; Ganguly, 2019, p. 84; Varshney, 2019, p. 75). On the contrary, discriminatory legislation has been adopted, such as the Citizen amendment act, which offers a fast-track to citizenship to religious minorities except for Muslims (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 13; Khosla & Vaishnav, 2021). In light of these developments, as of 2021, India was downgraded to "electoral autocracy" and "Partly Free" by Varieties of Democracy and Freedom House, respectively (Alizada et al., 2021; Freedom House, 2021). While the electoral aspects of Indian democracy mostly remain intact, this thesis will contribute to explaining how the BJP was able to get to power and infringe upon liberal democracy since 2014.

As is the trend among demagogues in recent years, Modi came to power through free and fair elections. Under Modi, the BJP secured a watershed election in 2014 and repeated the success with even higher numbers in 2019 (Varshney, 2019). There are of course a number of reasons for why a majoritarian party is able to get to power and initiate democratic backsliding. However, as an elite, upper-caste party, it appears puzzling that the BJP managed to garner support from more disadvantaged segments of society which traditionally had not largely voted for the BJP (Rukmini, 2019, p. 39; Thachil, 2009, pp. 1-2; Varshney, 2014, pp. 35-36). In this thesis, I will examine how one particularly important societal actor, namely the Hindu nationalist civil society organizations (CSOs) of the Sangh Parivar, appears to have strengthened and legitimized the Hindu nationalist agenda through service provision and thereby contributed to democratic erosion under BJP.

With the Indian state having struggled to adequately provide welfare services, the organizations of the Sangh Parivar increasingly catered to disadvantaged segments of society, particularly from the 1990s (Andersen & Damle, 2019). I argue that this is connected with the rise of the BJP and thus with India's democratic backsliding by way of a mechanism divided into two parts. Firstly, I argue that these CSOs through providing services to disadvantaged segments of society have been able to create trust and more generally legitimize themselves in society. This has furthermore enabled them to attempt to ideologically convince as well as sway these people's votes towards the BJP. Secondly, I argue that these people who trust the Sangh Parivar or view them as legitimate were affected by these organizations' attempts at ideological conviction and/or vote swaying and thus increasingly voted for the BJP either because they agreed with them ideologically or because they trusted the Sangh Parivar's advice on whom to vote for. Lastly, I contend that disadvantaged segments of society increasingly voting for the BJP contributed to the party's electoral victory and thus the ensuing democratic backsliding.

1.1. Research question

While CSOs have often been theorized to enhance democracy, I research whether this is also the case with India's Hindu nationalist strand of CSOs, posing the following research question:

How do Hindu nationalist civil society organizations have an influence on autocratization in India?

In order to answer this research question, I conduct a process tracing study which enables me to go behind the relationship between the Sangh Parivar's increased service provision and democratic backsliding to explore the underlying mechanism. To be able to test whether the mechanism as such is present, I develop a set of observable implications to guide me in the empirical inquiry. I mainly use scholarly literature, news articles and the Sangh Parivar's own sources, which has provided rich insights for my analysis. While keeping in mind that the Sangh Parivar has incentive to be perceived as benevolent and thriving, this also gives statements that go against these incentives even more leverage.

The evidence indicate that the Sangh Parivar did play a role in making disadvantaged segments of society increasingly vote for the BJP, and thus bringing the party to power. The

Sangh Parivar's increased service provision seems to have enabled them to build trustful relations to the recipients and overall legitimize themselves amongst disadvantaged segments of society. The evidence indicates that the Sangh Parivar through education did try to ideologically convince children but more importantly, schools provided access to larger communities. It also seems as though the Sangh Parivar has leveraged their carefully built relations to disadvantaged segments of society in conducting so-called awareness campaigns, attempting to get people to vote based on issues which the BJP has strong ownership to but without mentioning the party by name. I argue this has been one reason for the steady increase in disadvantaged segments of society's vote for the BJP, although other factors such as the appeal of Modi has definitely also played a role. It is important to be able to explain how the BJP, as an elite, upper-caste party has increasingly consolidated the Hindu vote by attracting the unlikely support of disadvantaged segments of society. This unexpected consolidation has enabled the government to take the India in an ever more majoritarian direction, backed by a sizable mandate. As we see democracy decline along similar lines in other countries as well, it is important to research why different segments of society vote for and continue to support authoritarian parties and politicians.

In answering this research question, I build on the literatures of social capital and democratic backsliding. While civil society has traditionally been viewed as enhancing democracy, scholars have increasingly pointed out that this is not always the case (Berman, 1997). I argue that in order to research the potential negative effects of civil society on democracy, we should view service providing organizations and parties in conjunction, like movements. While scholars have pointed to the various consequences of the Sangh Parivar's service provision, I explicitly couple this to democratic backsliding on the national level following Modi's rise to power.

1.2. Structure

This thesis will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will introduce the somewhat complex family of organizations that is the Sangh Parivar. Then follows the literature review, where I discuss the literature on democratic backsliding, contributions on the Sangh Parivar's service provision, and elaborate on how a strong civil society could also have negative effects on democracy. Following, the next chapter describes the research design. Here, I give a brief introduction to process tracing, describe the data and develop a set of guidelines for gathering data. I then go

on to analyze whether the empirical material allows me to infer that each part of the hypothesized mechanism was present, and thus whether the whole mechanism was present, leading CSOs' increased service provision to backsliding. Lastly, I discuss the findings and conclude.

1.3. The Hindu nationalist movement: Sangh Parivar

This thesis will focus on the role played by the Hindu nationalist movement, also known as the Sangh Parivar, in the election of the BJP and thus India's democratic backsliding. While Hindu nationalism today holds a prominent place in Indian society, its legitimation did not happen overnight. Hindu nationalism first developed in the early 1800s as the upper castes' reaction to the British colonizers and Christian missionaries (Basu, 2021, p. 3). However, sharp disagreements hindered its organization as a meaningful political force until the 1920s (Basu, 2021, p. 3). Around this time, the fractious Hindu nationalist movement united instead around Muslims as the most important outer enemy and threat to the Hindu nation (Basu, 2021, p. 3; Varshney, 2019, pp, 74-75). In 1923, V. D. Savarkar released the infamous book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, which has served as an important ideological foundation for Hindu nationalists ever since (Basu, 2021, p. 3; Kumbamu, 2020, p. 165). Savarkar's criteria for being Hindu are adhering to Hindu religion and culture, speaking Hindi and perceiving India as "sacred territory" (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Basu, 2021, p. 3; Sahoo, 2014, p. 485). This last point is the reason why Muslims and Christians are excluded from Hindu nationalists' conception of the Hindu nation, as opposed to e.g. Sikhs and Buddhists; they are perceived to see Arabia or Palestine as their holy land (Basu, 2021, p. 3; Sahoo, 2014, p. 485, Varshney, 2019, pp, 74-75).

Savarkar's ideology came to be clearly brought to life by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS - meaning "association of national volunteers"), which was founded by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925 (Anderen & Damle, 2019, p. xii; Kumbamu, 2020, p. 167). The RSS was established as a cultural rather than a political organization, seeking to create a Hindu nation from the bottom up, focusing on "character-building" through meetings, the effects of which would slowly spread, working towards social cohesion and cultural assimilation (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xii; Vaishnav, 2019, p. 10). However, the RSS is by many regarded as a paramilitary organization associated with fascism (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020; Kumbamu, 2020). The RSS has been banned several times, and notably after a former RSS member assassinated

Mahatma Gandhi (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xii). But the RSS slowly rose again from the 1960s and grew increasingly from the 1990s (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xii).

From the 1990s the RSS began to move away from the focus of character-building to try to spread its Hindu nationalist message to different segments of society through its affiliated organizations, for which it acts as a parent organization (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xiii). This large network is usually referred to as the Sangh Parivar, meaning the family of organizations associated with the RSS. While the Sangh Parivar had provided services, mostly in terms of relief work after natural disasters and similar, the service provision was now becoming more systematized (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xiv; Bhattacharjee, 2021, p. 5). Today many of these organizations engage in a wide variety of service activities across India, most of which are within education and health (Bhattacharjee, 2021, p. 5). Some of the most important affiliates include large trade unions such as Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the student organization Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, and charity organizations such as the Seva Bharati (Andersen & Damle, 2019; Chidambaram, 2012, p. 302). Notably, the BJP is also an affiliate, and Modi has his background from the RSS, as a full-time worker (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xii). Since the Sangh Parivar is the common name for the Hindu nationalist movement, I will be using these two terms interchangeably. Today the Sangh Parivar has a prominent place in Indian society (Andersen, 2021; Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Basu, 2021, p. 4), which is why it is so important to uncover mechanisms by which it contributes to democratic backsliding.

Whether the enormous network of the Sangh Parivar's contributions to democratic backsliding are intentional or not is outside the scope of this thesis. What one might say as a minimum is that an important goal of these organizations is a Hindu nation, the conception of which excludes Muslims and Christians, and on the other hand that they put vast resources behind welfare schemes. Whether these organizations as such view welfare provision as either inherently important or as instrumental to create a Hindu nation or a combination of the two, is not part of my argument. Without discussing too much around this movement's normatively positive or negative intentions, I seek to explore the mechanism by which these organizations might contribute to democratic backsliding in India by contributing to bringing the authoritarian BJP to power.

2. Literature review

This thesis builds on several strands of literature. In the following I will first lay out the essence of democratic backsliding, focusing on how backsliding typically takes place and how autocrats typically get to power. I then review the work of scholars showing how Hindu nationalist CSOs have provided services as a means to make inroads with disadvantaged segments of Indian society. Lastly, I review the literature on civil society and social capital's effects on democracy.

2.1. Democratic backsliding

The literature on democratic backsliding describes more recent trends where democracies are not overturned through coups but rather slowly, at the hands of elected governments (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Singer, 2021). If people feel like democracy is being run by a powerful elite, they might turn to radical or populist parties. This might again lead elected populists to attack established institutions, apparently to disempower the corrupt elite (Gandhi, 2018). Typically, democracy is weakened through institutions with the help of supporters such as partisans (Applebaum, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). Attacks at the opposition might be concealed as institutional reform, and overall measures are difficult to strike down as illegal (Applebaum, 2020; Bermeo, 2016). What is more, democratic institutions might perform very differently in one country. Elections as an institution might consist or even improve while civil rights are weakened (Ding & Slater, 2021; Varshney, 2019). Leaders might get to power through free and fair elections, only to use their mandate to weaken civil rights, which might even be popular and help secure re-election (Ding & Slater, 2021, p. 66). Thus, since most measures that impede democracy are legal or otherwise convincingly argued for, it becomes difficult to mobilize people against such regimes.

Much of the literature focuses on the ways in which the executive is able to impede democracy once elected. According to Khaitan (2020, p 55) the most crucial institution to hold accountable in liberal democracies is the executive, which might attack horizontal, vertical and diagonal accountability mechanisms. Electoral accountability might be undermined by the ruling party acquiring an unfair advantage over the opposition in elections (Khaitan, 2020, p. 56; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). Institutional accountability refers to how the legislative and judicial powers and various fourth branch-institutions such as the election committee hold the executive accountable (Khaitan, 2020, pp. 56-57). Lastly there is

discursive accountability which refers to how the executive is accountable to civil society and the public discourse (Khaitan, 2020, p. 57). Bajpai and Kureshi (2022) show how the executive, judicial or legislative branch, or non-state organizations could, in cooperation, or alone, contribute to democratic backsliding through removing the opposition from important positions in crucial institutions and delegitimize others' ideological frameworks. Bajpai and Kureshi (2022) contend that the level of alignment of state and civil society actors matters for the pace and scope of backsliding. Thus, scholars largely focus on how the executive attacks democratic institutions, potentially in cooperation with other seemingly democratic institutions.

Others again focus more on what makes people vote for these leaders, and what role populism might play in democratic backsliding. Populism entails an «us versus them»-dynamic, and populists often claim to represent «the real people», «us», in the name of democracy (Grzymala-Busse, 2019, pp. 35-36). According to Berman (2021), populism is often the result of a shift in the people's demands or of elites no longer being able to supply the people what they want. Demand-side explanations often focus on economic or socio-cultural grievances in explaining why people vote for populists. Authors such as Norris and Ingelhart (2019) have attempted to combine economic and socio-cultural explanations for populism. According to supply-side explanations, economic or socio-cultural changes do not by themselves create populism. Instead, the problem is that politicians are unable to respond to citizens' anger (Grzymala-Busse, 2019, p. 39). Thus, according to these structure-focused theories, the expectation is that socio-economic grievances or the failure of politicians to respond to such will make people inclined to vote populist.

Actor-centered explanations focus more on how parties and the actions of politicians could make people vote populist. When parties largely agree on important issues, such as neoliberalist policies, populist parties might try to stand out by actively driving debates beneficial for their issue salience, e.g. immigration debate (Berman, 2021; Grzymala-Busse, 2019). Closely related is the literature on citizens' values and the "threat perception thesis", where authoritarian politicians and parties play on cultural or economic anxieties and offer "protection" (Mason et al., 2021). Others address how social identities can be used for polarization, whether they were already present or were created for this purpose. Where cleavages are become increasingly salient people are forced to pick a side in a polarizing dynamic of strong "in-group love" and "out-group hate" (McCoy et al., 2018). The in-group is portrayed as homogenous, with few cross-cutting cleavages, compared to the outgroup

(Iyengar et al., 2019). Interaction and cooperation with the out-group is thus seen as a zero-sum game, which hinders collective action and makes it easier to justify most actions to weaken other parties (McCoy et al., 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Singer (2021) finds that supporters of the sitting government are less likely to speak up against democratic backsliding. Such developments might again lead to frustrations and violations by the other parties, making for a vicious cycle of polarization (McCoy et al., 2018). When politicians manage to increase the salience around issues or identities, this might make people vote for and defend the actions of undemocratic politicians.

2.2. Civil society's effects on democracy

This thesis further builds on the literature on social capital, in which a strong civil society has often been regarded an important component in strengthening democracy (Fukuyama, 2001; Putnam, 1993). So-called neo-Tocquevilleans hold that a strong civil society will strengthen democracy through internal effects on individuals and external effects on society at large. Internally, participating in associations familiarizes individuals with cooperation and creates a sense of solidarity with others. Externally, tight-knit networks of CSOs increase social trust, which alleviates collective action problems, thus enabling effective interest aggregation (Putnam, 1993, pp. 89-90). To produce these effects, CSOs ideally have a horizontal structure, focusing on concerns relevant to broad rather than narrow segments of society (Putnam, 1993). However, according to neo-Tocquevilleans, associations will likely produce such social capital unless they are vertically organized and based on dependency (Putnam, 1993). Assigning such importance to social capital, neo-Tocquevilleans hold that a weak civil society could lead to democracy's decay, and that e.g. this was the case with the rise of Nazism in Germany (Berman, 1997, p. 408).

Yet other scholars found these claims to be too simplistic (Berman, 1997; Foley & Edwards, 1996). Berman (1997) contends that German civil society was in fact rich, and that this did produce internal and external effects, but that this actually contributed to democracy's decay (1997, p. 408). Accordingly, further specification of when civil society might be beneficial to democracy is needed (Berman, 1997; Foley & Edwards, 1996; Widmalm, 2016). While Berman (1997) shows how a vigorous civil society helped the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) to power, I will contribute to this literature of specifying when civil

society might harm rather than improve democracy by analyzing Hindu nationalist organizations in India.

2.3. Sangh Parivar/BJP-cooperation on the state level

Studies show how the Sangh Parivar's basic service provision has helped the BJP electorally in various Indian states (Chidambaram, 2022; Sahoo, 2014; Thachil, 2011). The Sangh Parivar seemingly used service provision to gain a foothold within marginalized communities enabling the BJP to improve its electoral performance in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka (Chidambaram, 2022; Sahoo, 2014; Thachil, 2011). Chidambaram (2022) and Thahcil (2011) show how the tools available to the Sangh Parivar as CSOs as opposed to political agents allowed them to customize their approach, and thus enhance their political agenda (Chidambaram, 2022; Thachil, 2011).

Sahoo (2014) seeks to answer how NGOs impact democratization in India by analyzing a Sangh-affiliated development-focused NGO in the state of Rajasthan. Sahoo (2014, p. 491) points to how this NGO supported and even campaigned for the BJP, enabling a significant increase in vote share among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes between the 1998 and 2004 elections. Sahoo (2014, pp. 493-494) found that when the BJP has been in power in Rajasthan, it has promoted Hindutva organizations, facilitating their programs, implementing policies beneficial for the Hindutva project, and employing state institutions in a favorable way.

Chidambaram (2022) believes rightwing grassroots mobilization acts as a confounding variable in the relationship between the BJP's rise under Modi and autocratization in India. Chidambaram observed how an RSS-affiliate provided tutoring centers but also other community activities in Bengaluru, Karnataka, and thus were able to gradually spread their ideological views, drawing both students and other community members further into their network by customizing their approach.

Thachil (2011) studies how elite parties such as the BJP may gain votes from poor constituencies while remaining an elite party by offering services through affiliates, as seen in the state of Chhattisgarh. Thachil (2011) finds that the BJP's electoral strategy has not been one of simple quid pro quo-clientelism. By embedding themselves in villages, staying through multiple election cycles, service providers gained a favorable stance, as well as other

organizational benefits generated by being on the grassroots level. Then, around election time, these seemingly nonpolitical service providers influenced the villagers' vote in subtle ways, by e.g. organizing meetings and spreading rumors (Thachil, 2011, pp. 452-453). Thachil (2011, p. 464) thus finds that in Chhattisgarh the BJP performed considerably better among the poor in areas "with dense service networks". Thachil (2011, pp. 460-461) also finds that Dalits and Adivasis who received services were much more likely to vote BJP than those who did not receive services, and that voters who simply had a positive view of the Sangh Parivar were also influenced.

Thus, all three studies find that Sangh Parivar organizations' service provision helped the BJP electorally but differ slightly on how they find that these electoral strategies have impacted democracy. Sahoo focuses more on the interplay between the BJP-led state and the Sangh Parivar as damaging to democracy in terms of policies adopted, rather than establishing whether service provision came prior to BJP victories. Chidambaram (2022) views the minority-hostile policies adopted in Karnataka as a "macro-aggregation" of the Sangh Parivar's attempts at altering the attitudes of the less privileged (Chidambaram, 2022, p. 109). Thachil mainly studies how the Sangh Parivar's efforts helps the BJP gain votes. Thachil (2011, p. 465) indicates that such an electoral strategy might not necessarily have a negative effect on democracy, saying it is "less likely to succeed in (or succeed in producing) a sharply polarized environment". Thus, Chidambaram and Sahoo find that service provision through various mechanisms impeded democracy in terms of the adoption of majoritarian policies, while Thachil is more unclear on the consequences for democracy.

2.4. Contributions to the literature

I contribute to the literature by seeking to bridge insights from the broader literature on democratic backsliding and the more specific literature on social capital, and in so doing contribute to explain democratic backsliding in India. I contend that civil society actors should be taken into account not only during democratic backsliding but also in bringing an autocrat to power. I argue that how effectively political actors are able to mobilize voters might depend on the slowly moving, not as easily observable work of grassroots organizations. Thus, when studying autocratic parties' rise to power, we should take into account whether a wider movement might have contributed to this. I also contribute to the literature on social capital by contending that civil society should not always be viewed as a

benevolent actor. Rather, service provision could also be used to enhance a larger movement's undemocratic vision of society. Lastly, while the literature on Hindu nationalist CSOs largely consists of case studies of Indian states or organizations, I seek to contribute by investigating national-level dynamics and explicitly couple it to national-level democratic backsliding.

3. Theory: Civil society and democratic erosion

While it appears as though the BJP has come to power by mobilizing based on social grievances and increase the saliency of the century-long Hindu/Muslim cleavage, I argue that this was far from the BJP's work alone, and that this started far before the 2014 election. I argue that it is insufficient to look only at the BJP or Modi to understand how the party was able to get to power and initiate democratic backsliding. I argue that we must also look at the Sangh Parivar's service provision to disadvantaged segments of society, which seems to have worked slowly in the Hindu nationalist movement's, and thus the BJP's, favor.

3.1. The Sangh Parivar's increased service provision

Recognizing the need to generate votes from more disadvantaged segments of society rather than their previous character-building approach, from the 1990s the Sangh Parivar began to expand and formalize its provision of services towards marginalized segments of society (Thachil, 2009). While many of these organizations had existed for decades, they had not been very active until now (Thachil, 2009, p. 80). The Sangh Parivar organizations solely dedicated to service provision, such as the Seva Bharati and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram both saw "massive growth during the 1990s" (Thachil, 2009, p. 83). The Seva Bharati and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram focus largely on providing services lower to lower caste and slum areas and to tribal areas, respectively. Seva Bharati might be considered the main welfare wing of the Sangh Parivar, and it too is an umbrella organization, with many affiliated organizations working within welfare provision. Between 1990 and 2006 the Seva Bharati more than ten times doubled its number of active units (Thachil, 2009, p. 84). The Sewa Disha, the Seva Bharati's own report, as cited by Chidambaram (2022, p. 105) shows a massive increase in projects, and particularly within health and education increasing from roughly 15.000 to 57.000 between 1997 and 2014 (Chidambaram, 2022, p. 105). Andersen and Damle (2019, p. xiv) also note a massive growth within the RSS' service efforts as provided through the Sangh Parivar organizations, going from 5,000 service projects to 165,000 by 2015. While the RSS had been running schools for quite some time, in 1978 the Vidya Bharati was established to coordinate this on a national level (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. 64; Sarkar, 1994, p.11). By 1991, Vidya Bharati claimed to run the largest non-public chain of schools in India (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. 65; Sarkar, 1994, p. 11; Sarkar, 2019, p. 161). From 1988 to 2003 the number of Vidya Bharati schools increased by 15,000 to

20,000 in total (Thachil, 2009, pp. 83-84). Thus, there was a substantial increase in the Sangh Parivar's service provision from the 1990s.

It also seems clear that the Sangh Parivar's increased service provision has been directed at disadvantaged segments of society, prioritizing the expansion of its organizations that cater to poorer, non-elite communities lacking in state provision (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Thachil, 2009, p. 84). The nature of the services provided by these organizations also underscore this. While some Vidya Bharati schools are more formal, the Sangh Parivar also runs one-teacher schools, schools for tribals and schools in slums that provide very basic and not necessarily daily schooling (Sarkar, 2019, p. 162). In one-teacher schools, students are taught a few hours per day, often "under a tree or inside a thatched hut", according to Organiser (2009), a news site widely regarded to be a part of the Sangh Parivar. Such minimal education would only appeal to those who have no other option (Sarkar, 2019, p. 162). Regarding healthcare provision, the Seva Bharati's own report (Rashtriya Sewa Bharati, 2004) states that those in tribal and rural areas as well as urban slums are provided with mostly free or very cheap services through their health care centers, and that setting up such services is prioritized in areas that lack in these. The RSS also consistently describes the areas in which they prioritize setting up one-teacher schools as "geographically inaccessible places rather than socially deprived ones" (Sarkar, 1994, p. 11). The Seva Bharati's report even states that tribal and rural areas and urban slums "are targeted by us in that order of priority" (Rashtriya Sewa Bharati, 2004). While the Sangh tries to argue that they provide services based on inaccessibility it appears clear that the Sangh Parivar has been focusing on providing services to disadvantaged segments of society.

3.2. The BJP in power and democratic backsliding

I argue that the Sangh Parivar's increased service provision among disadvantaged segments of society has contributed to bringing the BJP to power by building trust, ideologically convincing and swaying people's votes. I will return to further developing this mechanism below. The Sangh Parivar's part in helping the BJP to power of course would not have to lead to democratic backsliding. However, as the BJP gained such large mandates in both 2014 and 2019, the party has not been constrained by coalition partners, which has been common in Indian politics since the 1980s. Nevertheless, since the BJP came to power, India's liberal democracy has declined (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022; Chidambaram, 2022; Chowdhury & Keane,

2021; Ganguly, 2019; Varshney, 2019). The BJP has initiated various measures damaging to democracy, and with the BJP being democratically elected on the basis of a dividing ideology, it has been difficult to mobilize opposition against such measures. The backsliding follows a trajectory similar to that of other instances of democratic backsliding (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 9).

Firstly, freedom of expression has increasingly been under pressure since the Modi government took office (Ganguly, 2019; Varshney, 2019). The media is increasingly experiencing censorship (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Varshney, 2019, p. 73; Ganguly, 2019, p. 83). Furthermore, journalists and artists have been murdered on Modi's watch but without clear condemnation from the government (Chidambaram, 2022, p. 101; Ganguly, 2019, p. 86; Varshney, 2019, p. 73). Critical voices within academia, journalism and human rights and protesters have been cracked down upon by use of draconian sedition, defamation and counterterrorism laws (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Ganguly, 2019, p. 84; Ganguly, 2020, p. 193; Khosla & Vaishnav, 2021).

Furthermore, the Judiciary has come under new levels of pressure under Modi (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12; Ganguly, 2021, p. 180; Varshney, 2019, pp. 73-74). Four of the Supreme Court Justices publicly protested against "executive interference" in 2018, and many argue they have attempted to avoid conflict by ruling in the government's favor (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 13).

From the position of government, the BJP removed critical voices from positions of power, largely in legal ways, such as keeping various positions vacant for long periods, both in Parliament and other oversight institutions (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 9; Khaitan, 2020, p. 65). Furthermore, with its legislative majority the BJP passed disputed laws without conferring committees, such as a law opening up for "unlimited anonymous corporate donations to political parties", which the BJP receives a substantial part of (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, pp. 11-12).

Furthermore, India is arguably moving away from its secularist principles under Modi, through its rhetoric and inaction but also through majoritarian political measures. The BJP government withdrew Jammu and Kashmir's special status, and also placed a "religious criterion" on citizenship, excluding Muslims, through the Citizen Amendment Act (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 13; Varshney, 2019, p. 74). And while India has seen its fair share of Hindu-Muslim riots, under the BJP there has been lynchings (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022, p. 12;

Chidambaram, 2022, p. 101; Subramanya, 2017; Varshney, 2019, p. 75). Muslims have been targeted by vigilantes, framing this as punishment for trading or consuming beef but also conversions to Islam and so-called "love jihad", i.e. Muslim men attempting to marry Hindu women (Ganguly, 2019, p. 88; Varshney, 2019, p. 75). Modi and the BJP's response to this violence is either lacking or insufficient (Ganguly, 2019, p. 84; Varshney, 2019, p. 75). As put by Sumit Ganguly (2019, p. 88), "illiberal forces existed before the BJP ever came to power, of course, but the party's time in office seems to have lent them new vigor".

3.3. Scope conditions

For CSOs' service provision to contribute to democratic backsliding through the mechanisms I develop further below, there must be certain scope conditions in place. CSOs' ability to effectively spread their services and subsequently gain people's trust prerequisites that the state does not already widely provide basic services and that a substantial share of people is unable to pay for private alternatives.

Many Indians still lack adequate access to very basic services, and especially within health and education (Chowdhury & Keane, 2021; Ganguly, 2021). Those who cannot pay for private alternatives are often left with inadequate or nonexistent welfare services (Chowdhury & Keane, 2021). In India around 2.4 million die annually from treatable conditions, a number which includes people who did receive healthcare (Chowdhury & Keane, 2021, p. 54). Twice as many Indians die each year due to poor health care services compared to Bangladeshis (Chowdhury & Keane, 2021, p. 54). According to Iwanek (2021) there is no doubt that the Indian state has provided inadequate education to its citizens. Public schools have a teacher absentee rate of 21 percent, and a student absentee rate of 33 percent (Chowdhury & Keane, 2021, p. 121). Dalits and Adivasis that attend school often drop out due to poverty and discrimination. 75 percent of children not attending school in India are Dalits, Adivasis or Muslims (Chowdhury & Keane, 2021, p. 128). Another important precondition is that of inaccessibility to such services by virtue of living in rural areas, which 65 percent of Indians did as of 2019 (Varshney, 2019, p. 68). Thus, people disadvantaged in terms of economy and/or social status often have poor access to basic welfare services, a vacuum that might be filled by CSOs such as the Sangh Parivar. If services were in fact adequately provided by the state, or alternatively, as has been common in India, through other vertical relations of

dependence, there would likely not be as much demand for the Sangh Parivar's services (Chidambaram, 2012, p. 298; Heller, 2000, p. 496; Thachil, 2009, p. 4).

When people are unable to aggregate their interests in terms of adequate access to basic public services and are unable acquire alternatives, this creates room for alternative providers. This view follows Berman (1997, p. 427), who proposes that if institutions are unable or unwilling to aggregate interests and are viewed as illegitimate, a strong civil society could overshadow the state's role, weakening democracy by mobilizing cleavages. Berman (1997) is not that specific when defining political institutions, speaking of the government, state and of political parties interchangeably. While Berman (1997) points to several changes in society that made people turn to associations rather than politics, such as the increased saliency of divisive issues, economic crisis and parties' inability to adapt to modern politics, I will focus on the lack of interest aggregation. I assume that the poor largely vote for redistribution, and thus view the lack of service provision as a sign of failure of the interest aggregation of marginalized groups. It should also be mentioned that Indians, regardless of economic and social status, largely vote (Varshney, 2019, p. 70), i.e. they have attempted to aggregate their interest in terms of access to basic services, but without success.

Where political agents fail to aggregate the interests of marginalized segments of society, coordinated grassroots organizations are well-suited to develop and execute carefully crafted welfare-based strategies in order to gain access to these. CSOs are able to appear as intrinsically driven and build trust to a larger extent than political parties, which serves as an important advantage in attracting people. Failing to provide basic services indicates, among other things, that politicians have been unable to make good on promises they have made e.g. during election campaigning. Political parties might be perceived to primarily be vote-seeking, and only present around election time, at least unless they have well-functioning local branches. Ideology-driven grassroots organizations, on the other hand, are perceived stay over longer periods of time and being intrinsically driven to e.g. provide volunteer-based services.

Also, I argue that in order to uncover how such a situation might lead to democratic backsliding, there should be a party and a relatively large set of CSOs which share a dividing ideology, like a movement. Where Berman (1997) points out how the NSDAP used a dense network of CSOs already in place, I argue that civil society networks may also have their own agenda, such as creating a Hindu state.

Given the scope condition that large segments of society have inadequate access to basic services, I theorize that these segments of society will be more inclined to accept the services offered by grassroots organizations. Furthermore, the assumption is that it is the service provision, and not ideological appeal that enable these grassroots organizations to make inroads to these communities. Associationism is defined as "the propensity of individuals to form and join a wide range of organizations spontaneously", such as clubs, nationalist organizations or choirs (Berman, 1997, pp. 405-416). While the host of volunteers and activists of the Sangh Parivar are crucial in conducting these strategies, the focus here is not so much disadvantaged people's membership in organizations or them joining associations in order to aggregate their political interests through campaigns or similar. Instead, the focus is on how the lack of service provision in their lives, the improvement of which is moving too slowly for these people from what they would expect by casting their vote, leads to them accept services from grassroots organizations. The vacuum left by the state in terms of service provision, and the structural conditions facilitating for CSOs' ability to be perceived as apolitical enables their access to disadvantaged segments of society through a strategy of service provision.

3.4. A theory of when civil society might harm democracy

In order to explain how I find that Hindu nationalist CSOs' increased service provision to disadvantaged segments of society has had an impact on autocratization in India, I have developed a model with a mechanism split into two parts.

	Cause	M1	M2	Outcome
Causal chain	CSOs increasingly offer basic services to those unable to acquire such.	<u>CSOs'</u> *regular service provision creates trust and broader societal legitimation*, enabling *ideological conviction and/or vote swaying.*	<u>Beneficiaries and those holding a favorable view of CSOs</u> *contribute to election* of the party tied to CSOs.	Democratic backsliding under elected government.
Observable implications	Sangh Parivar is increasing its service provision aimed at disadvantaged segments of society, such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.	Sangh Parivar has been organizing efforts to adapt to local needs, portraying themselves as apolitical, attempting to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society through education, and conducting election-related activity.	Increase in BJP vote share from Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes in 2014 and 2019 national elections.	Attacks on freedom of speech, minority rights and independence of judiciary under the BJP.
Sources	Scholarly literature, Sangh Parivar's own sources.	Scholarly literature, Sangh Parivar's own sources, news articles.		Scholarly literature, reports.

<u>Actors</u> are underlined and *actions* are in italics.

3.4.1. M1: Trust-building, ideological conviction and vote swaying

I theorize that the increase in the Sangh Parivar's provision of basic services from the 1990s sets in motion the first part of the mechanism, which is that *CSOs' regular service provision creates trust as well as broader societal legitimation, enabling ideological conviction and/or vote swaying*. As grassroots organizations get access to these segments of society, the regularity of their service provision creates trust, enabling them to try to ideologically convince people and/or sway votes in favor of the given party they support. These grassroots organizations have strong incentive both to spread their dividing ideology and to have the party with which they share this ideology elected, so as to consolidate it politically. Berman (1997) shows how the NSDAP exploited the divided yet well-organized civil society already in place irrespective of the party, not necessarily sharing the aims of civil society or cooperating as two coherent actors. I view this network of grassroots organizations more as a

coordinated movement, using carefully crafted strategies aiming to spread their ideology and also have the party with which they are connected elected. The Hindu nationalist part of Indian civil society has a rather clear and coherent vision for India, which is very similar to that of the BJP and its proposed politics, probably a result of the BJP being founded by the RSS.

While grassroots organizations and political parties may share ideological or political goals, grassroots organizations have a wider variety of tools available to realize these in order to create trust. Activists working on the grassroots level have important contacts and social skills and may gather information on locals in order to adapt their strategies or even pass information onto the party. Also, organizations might meet people on an interconnected set of arenas, providing people with an increasing number of services or encouraging them to join more and more activities or meetings. With the access to disadvantaged segments of society through providing them services, workers of these organizations are thus able to develop bonds of trust. While those who actually receive services and know service providers more personally might be the ones to trust these people and the organizations the most, these organizations likely become more legitimized in the eyes of the remainder of such societies as well, watching them contribute to their communities as such.

Through everyday interaction as well as more specific activities such as education, these organizations are able to ideologically convince many of the service beneficiaries, as well as wider communities. Seemingly neutral activities such as education or just interacting regularly with service providers will often come with more or less subtle ideological messages. Both because being told or discussing matters with someone you trust will be more impactful, and because disguising ideological messages behind education is a very effective way of ideologically convincing children from a young age. Also, uniting yet ideological activities taking place around schools as well as children bringing ideological discourse and practices back home might impact the community ideologically. People who are convinced by this ideology that is advocated by these grassroots organizations and matches the that of the party subsequently become more likely to vote for this party for ideological reasons.

However, it is not necessary for recipients of services from these grassroots organizations to become ideologically convinced to vote for the given party. The grassroots organizations might also use these bonds of trust to try to sway these people's votes around election time through everyday conversations or even subtle election campaigning. These organizations enjoy high levels of legitimation amongst disadvantaged segments of society to whom they

provide services, and strong bonds of trust to those who directly received services or whom they come in contact with while doing so. While also enjoying the status as CSOs as opposed to a political party, workers of these organizations are well-suited to contribute to swaying votes in favor of the party to which they are connected, through interactions ranging from casual private conversation to more subtle campaigning.

When the coherent strategies of these grassroots organizations and parties are based on dividing ideologies, this might serve as a damaging force to democracy. Even if many of the effects stipulated by neo-Tocquevilleans materialize, such as many members, democratic organization and interaction with other organizations, if this activity takes place mostly within cleavages, it will likely serve to weaken democracy (Berman, 1997, p. 418). In India, while these organizations stress the unification of *Hindus* across caste lines and seek to help the less privileged, they do not work cross-cleavage towards a unification of Indians *as such*. Muslims and Christians are not only excluded from this unifying narrative, they are even constructed as an important other. Building on Chidambaram (2022) I theorize that mobilization by majoritarian groups works both to create majoritarian values among participants and to make those directly and indirectly affected by mobilization vote for the given majoritarian party.

3.4.2. M2: Electoral effect

The second part of the mechanism is for beneficiaries and those holding a favorable view of the CSOs to contribute to the election of the party tied to these CSOs. I theorize that those among the disadvantaged segments of society that were ideologically convinced and/or exposed to these grassroots organizations' attempts at vote swaying largely go out and vote for the party to which these organizations are connected. Accordingly, they cast their vote for this party either because they now share the party's ideology or because they without, at least entirely, adopting this ideology still chose to listen to the advice from people whom they trust when deciding whom to vote for. If this were not the case, these people would not have much incentive to vote for the given party as neither its ideology nor programmatic content should be appealing to them. The votes from these people, who I theorize would not largely vote for this party if it were not for the service provision of the grassroots organizations, thus contributes to bringing this party to power.

4. Research design

4.1. Process tracing

In order to test the above hypothesized mechanism, I employ process tracing. Process tracing is a well-suited method to answer my research question due to its ability to go behind the causal relationship and uncover the mechanism leading the cause to the outcome, enabling me to test each for the presence or absence of each part of the hypothesized mechanism. In other words, process tracing lets us go beyond statistical large-N inference, estimating an effect of X on Y, and actually explore the mechanisms behind the relationship (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 3). While there is a lack of agreement on a definition of process tracing, most scholars agree on the centrality of causal inference. Bennett and Checkel (2014, p. 7) define process tracing as "the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case".

While there is some disagreement in the literature regarding what exactly a mechanism is, I will be following the view of Beach and Pedersen (2019). According to Beach and Pedersen (2019, p. 3) "mechanisms are not causes but are causal processes that are triggered by causes and that link them with outcomes in a productive relationship". Understanding mechanisms as systems, as opposed to a more minimalist understanding, Beach and Pedersen furthermore hold that the parts of the mechanism are not intervening variables in between the cause and the outcome either. Neither the whole mechanism nor its parts exist independently but are rather "integral elements of a system that transmits causal forces to the outcome" (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 38). Furthermore, the respective parts of a mechanism are ideally expressed as "entities that engage in activities" (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 38), as I have done.

Whether we may infer that the stipulated mechanism was present in the case or not depends on whether our belief in its presence has been updated. We evaluate whether our evidence allows us to update our confidence in the presence of each part of the mechanism compared to our prior confidence. If updating takes place for each part we can update our confidence in the presence of the mechanism as such (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, pp. 184-185). However, our confidence in the existence of the whole mechanism is only as strong as the weakest test. Thus, if only a weak updating takes place for one of the parts of the mechanism, then the

overall updating of beliefs of the mechanism will be low as well (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 185).

Process tracing largely relies on Bayesian logic of inference, which allows us to make within-case inferences (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 75). According to this logic we can update our belief in the presence of the mechanism depending on our prior knowledge, the leverage of the evidence and how trustworthy the sources are (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 178). The Bayesian logic highlights the "likelihood of finding certain evidence if a theory is true versus the likelihood of finding this evidence if the alternative explanation is true" (Bennett, 2006, p. 341). We can be increasingly confident about our theory "when the posterior probability of a theory exceeds the prior probability before evidence was collected". From this follows that conducting new research is crucial (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 84). However, since our prior knowledge often stems from cross-case studies as opposed to process-based research, in practice our prior confidence will often be low. If we have low prior confidence, most new information will contribute to updating our belief in the presence of a mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 183). How strong inferences we can make depends on the tests we use and their degree of uniqueness and certainty (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, p. 17).

In process tracing one employs data which cannot be compared neither within nor between cases. Furthermore, in order to function as evidence, the data must be interpreted according to case-specific knowledge (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 73). Also, certain observations might be more important inferentially than others (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 72), which is a clear advantage compared to quantitative methods. Given the use of noncomparable evidence, process tracing allows for within-case but not cross-case inferences (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 69).

Beach and Pedersen (2013) propose to categorize process tracing into theory-testing, theory-building and outcome-explaining variants. Accordingly, the aim is to test whether a mechanism is present, to construct a mechanism based on theory, or to explain a given outcome, respectively – within one case (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 69). I employ process tracing not to construct my theory, but to test it. Thus, using theory-testing process tracing, I will analyze whether my theory about the hypothesized mechanism described in the previous chapter is present by testing for the presence of India-specific observable implications derived in the following subsection.

4.2. Observable implications

In the following, I will introduce a set of observable implications related to each part of the stipulated mechanism, arguing for the relevance and importance of each implication. Overall, the observable implications pertain particularly to the role and increasing influence of the Sangh Parivar among disadvantaged segments of society. Thus, I will not be looking at CSOs in India as such, but the Hindu nationalist part of it. With the Sangh Parivar being the widely used term for the family of organizations adhering to Hindu nationalism, it is these CSOs that I will be looking for evidence from. While certain large and well-known organizations make up part of the Sangh Parivar, there is no formal list of all the small organizations that consider themselves to be part of this family of organizations. In practice, I will use evidence that refers both to the Sangh Parivar in general and to the specific organizations that are clearly tied to the Sangh Parivar, such as the RSS or the Seva Bharati. It is also worth noting that the BJP is widely considered to be part of the Sangh Parivar, however, for analytical purposes the BJP is left out of the definition of the Sangh Parivar as I use the term in the following unless stated otherwise. It is worth noting that the Sangh Parivar provides various kinds of services directed at disadvantaged segments of society, and that they do so through a wide variety of organizations. These could be local-level organizations such as local schools tied to larger organizations such as the Vidya Bharati, but could also directly provided through larger organizations, such as the wide network of Vidya Bharati schools. In some instances, such as the Vidya Bharati, service provision is the organization's main task, but often organizations provide a wide variety of services and activities. Notwithstanding these at times confusing structures that often even vary from state to state, I will focus on services provided by the Sangh Parivar as such, which has not been difficult to distinguish.

4.2.1. Observable implications for M1

With CSOs increasingly offering basic services, this sets in motion the first part of the stipulated mechanism, where the service provision creates trust, as well as broader societal legitimization, enabling ideological conviction and/or vote swaying. This part of the mechanism is the most extensive, and so I will develop several implications that we should be able to observe if this part of the mechanism has been in play.

Firstly, we **should be able to observe the Sangh Parivar organizing their efforts to adapt to local needs** in order to build trust. We should be observing the Sangh attempting to adapt

to local needs through attempting to professionally organize their efforts and holding their workers accountable. Prioritizing local workers who are accepted by the locals rather than sent from central headquarters only to work there for a term or similar would also indicate attempts to adapt to the locals. Also, since trustful relations are essential for the Sangh Parivar to have the ear of disadvantaged segments of society who are used to being exploited for quid-pro-quo-clientelism, attempts at conversion and the like, we would expect the Sangh to work hard to gain trustful relations. The nature of certain services such as schooling indicates by itself that these services are provided by the Sangh Parivar for longer periods of time, as it is unlikely that schools would be taken down right after an election in a quid-pro-quo manner. If the Sangh were not able to develop trustful relations to these people, they would likely not continue to use these services, and they would be decreasing in scope.

We **should also be able to observe the Sangh Parivar portraying themselves as apolitical**, to build trust. This should be the case at least in the initial service provision, by strictly providing services and not discussing religion or politics. This way they would be trusted to provide services out of intrinsic motivation or at least without political motivations. Apoliticism is difficult to measure, but I will attempt to measure how workers, volunteers and the Sangh Parivar as such seek to *portray themselves* as apolitical, because they arguably are not.

Furthermore, we **should be able to observe the Sangh Parivar attempting to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society through education.** While it probably is the frequent, informal contact between service providers and these less privileged communities that is most important in ideological conviction, this is difficult to measure. Instead, attempts at ideological conviction is most easily observed through the Sangh's educational offers. Hindu nationalist curriculum and teaching provided through Sangh Parivar services are good although not perfect ways to observe how the Sangh try to ideologically convince people. I would expect that if children were subjected to majoritarian, Hindu nationalist narratives through curriculum and teaching that a large share of these children would internalize many of these values and ideology. If the curriculum and teaching is ideological in nature, disseminating a majoritarian narrative, then we may conclude that the Sangh Parivar is attempting to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society through education.

Lastly, we **should be able to observe the Sangh Parivar conducting election-related activity.** This is a good way of measuring how the Sangh is trying to turn people's trust in them and their legitimated status into votes. People would be more likely to listen to the

political opinions or advice of actors enjoying high degrees of trust and legitimization. Whether or not the Sangh Parivar has held election events or campaigns should be easily observable through e.g. news reporting, and so absence of evidence probably would indicate that this did not take place on a large scale. However, there might still have been many smaller events or meetings that is not reported by media. Thus, I will be seeking for all kinds of election events and campaigning efforts, but I will not invest too much time in searching for evidence of smaller events.

The Sangh Parivar's attempts at adapting to local needs and appearing apolitical, them attempting to ideologically convince through education and them conducting election-related activity will illuminate how it is the regularity of service provision that creates trust and societal legitimization, enabling ideological conviction and/or vote swaying.

4.2.2. Observable implications for M2

As a result of gaining more trust and legitimization which has enabled ideological conviction and/or vote swaying, the last part of the mechanism consists of *these beneficiaries and those holding a favorable view of these CSOs actually contributing to the election of the given party*.

Given the assumption that these basic services are provided to disadvantaged segments of society, I find that a good way to observe this part of the mechanism is through the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe votes. Members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are also known as Dalits (formerly "untouchables") and Adivasis, respectively. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes "disproportionately represent socially and economically marginalized Indians" (Thachil, 2009, p. 5). Surely, far from all those classified as Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes have benefitted from the services of the Sangh Parivar. What is more, many but not all members of these groups are disadvantaged, and all disadvantaged people are not captured by these groups, but I nevertheless believe that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are good populations to indicate the people receiving help from the Sangh Parivar. With the extensive numbers of projects the Sangh has been and still is running, I find it rather likely that even those within the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that did not directly benefit have in some way made up their mind as to whether they trust the intentions of the Sangh, which could in turn affect how they vote.

In light of this, **we should be able to observe the share of BJP's votes from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes increase in the 2014 and 2019 elections**. While this could be observed in state-level elections, as many researchers indeed have focused on, this thesis is focusing on the democratic backsliding that has taken place since 2014, and with renewed force from 2019, thanks to the BJP-run government. Therefore, I will be looking at how Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes voted in the 2014 and 2019 national elections, to determine whether these groups contributed to bringing the BJP to power nationally. I will be looking at whether these groups voted for the BJP to a large extent compared to earlier elections and compared to other parties which they usually previously voted for. For 2019 I will then look at whether these numbers continue to increase. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have traditionally not largely voted for the BJP, being an elitist party that has been considered neither ideologically nor programmatically appealing to them. Therefore, these groups increasingly voting for the BJP would be valuable evidence to shed light on the ways in which the Sangh Parivar's service provision has affected Indian democratic backsliding by driving these vote shares.

4.2.3. Evaluating the set of observable implications

Taken together, if I were to observe all the implications above, I would be rather confident in my hypothesized mechanism leading increased service provision by CSOs to democratic backsliding. Observing this would be good indications that CSOs' increasing its provision of basic services to those who lack them, which generates trust and enables ideological conviction and eventually vote swaying, which will make disadvantaged segments of society increasingly vote for the party in question, resulting in democratic backsliding. It has not been entirely uncomplicated to derive these observable implications, though. In particular, it would have been beneficial to be able to know more about disadvantaged segments of society's encounter with the Sangh Parivar, both through service provision and during elections. However, I find ideological conviction through education and election-related activity to be good implications of what I am trying to measure. It would also be beneficial if I were able to observe who received services from the Sangh Parivar and if these people ended up voted for the Sangh Parivar. Unable to gather such data, I find that the voting patterns of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes suffice. While these mechanisms have been somewhat difficult to operationalize, I believe this should not stop us from researching these important phenomena,

but rather that we should draw causal inferences with caution. Below follows a description of the data I have generated in order to test the above observable implications.

4.3. Data

The data will mainly consist of scholarly literature, news articles and various data from the Sangh Parivar, either from their own reports, or statements made through their own outlets or through news articles. Certainly, this research question and method opens for gathering a range of data. Interviews with prominent CSO leaders, BJP party leaders, or even ordinary people could have been valuable. However, not only would conducting such interviews in India be extremely resource demanding, but I also consider it unlikely that I would be able to obtain information with more leverage than journalists or scholars on this. Scholarly literature has thus been an invaluable data source, and to a large extent the most effective way to gather data on this. To the degree that these studies have high validity, their findings constitute relevant and rich pieces of evidence that I consider crucial to my analysis. Some of the scholarly literature used as evidence in this thesis is qualitative in nature and contain rich evidence from fieldwork in Indian states.

News articles have been useful for documenting statements from the Sangh Parivar, as well as the Sangh Parivar's subtle election campaigning. I make sure to continuously consider whether these news outlets have incentives to portray either themselves or the Sangh Parivar in a particular manner.

Lastly, data stemming from the Sangh Parivar, either from their own sites or as statements via the media, has provided rich insights, although it required me to take certain precautions. Particularly I have taken into account the Sangh Parivar's incentive to be perceived as a legitimate and benign force in society at large. The Sangh Parivar also has inventive to portray its family of organizations as successful and thriving, both to attract new followers and to boost morale among those already on board with their project. Local-level workers or leaders could have incentive to make their projects appeal more successful to please leaders at higher levels of the organization, and/or the top leaders themselves could choose to tamper with or edit information received from below. To the general public these organizations might have incentive to tone down or sugarcoat their Hindu nationalist appearance. Then again, they also have incentive to convey a more Hindu nationalist message to their core supporters.

Thus, when analyzing data from Sangh Parivar sources I take into account the various incentives these actors may have.

4.3.1. Guidelines in gathering data

In order to secure high validity in this process tracing study I will follow certain guidelines in the data generation process, which is largely in accordance with Bennett and Checkel's (2014) guidelines for good process tracing. Firstly, I seek to avoid looking for evidence confirming my hypotheses as opposed to evidence that contributes to disconfirming it. An important aspect in this regard is to be open to alternative explanations, such as theories developed by scholars or journalists (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, p. 18). I thus seek to ensure reliability and validity by openly and vigorously assessing sources that could also weaken my hypotheses (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, pp. 23-24). Since I attempt to update beliefs in accordance with Bayesian logic, I seek to triangulate information using new streams of evidence, and ensure that these are truly diverse streams of evidence and not containing the same biases or similar (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, pp. 27-28). For instance, triangulating information from the Sangh Parivar with accounts from a news article does not serve much purpose if this newspaper has strong connections to the Sangh Parivar. This demand for both profound and many data sources means that it can be challenging to determine when to stop looking for evidence, and how to determine whether absence of evidence is evidence of absence. According to Bennett and Checkel, one should "be relentless in gathering diverse and relevant evidence, but make a justifiable decision on when to stop" (2014, p. 27). Thus, the more probative the finding of a piece of evidence would be, the more I will prioritize searching for it (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, p. 28). And as elaborated above, I will beware of biases, such as actors seeking to be perceived a certain or other biases in scholarly and news articles. It should also be more difficult to find evidence of people holding socially less acceptable views, so we should treat absence of evidence thereafter (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, p. 33). Following these guidelines will help reaping the benefits that qualitative, noncomparable evidence offers, allowing for strong within-case inferences with high internal validity.

5. Analysis

In the analysis I will discuss whether the empirical evidence supports the existence of the observable implications and thus whether we can infer that the mechanism as such was present. I.e., I will discuss whether we can infer that Hindu nationalist organizations' increased service provision to disadvantaged segments of society, has enabled trust-building and broader societal legitimation, and thus ideological conviction and/or vote swaying. Furthermore I will discuss whether this has led the beneficiaries and those holding a favorable view of the Sangh Parivar to contribute to the election of the BJP, and thus to democratic backsliding.

5.1. Trust-building, ideological conviction and vote-swaying

With the Sangh Parivar having increased its service provision within health and education to disadvantaged segments of society, I will now seek to establish whether this enabled them to build trust as well as broader societal legitimation, enabling ideological conviction and/or vote swaying. I argue that it is important to research the ways in which the Sangh works to build trust in order to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society who would otherwise both be unlikely to vote BJP and hard to get on board with the Hindu nationalist project.

5.1.1. The Sangh Parivar as trustworthy and apolitical?

In order to establish whether the Sangh Parivar has been creating trustful relations through its service provision, this first part evaluates whether the Sangh has been organizing their efforts to adapt to local needs and trying to appear apolitical.

According to the Sangh Parivar organizations' own sources, their service projects place importance on using local people. According to the Seva Bharati's own report, for one-teacher schools as well as for basic health initiatives, the Seva Bharati or its affiliated organizations select a few local persons from the village, who have at least primary education, and give them "basic training" in order to provide services (Rashtriya Sewa Bharati, 2004). According to this report, the selection of local people is a way of overcoming the problem of getting teachers to work in these areas, and also the person first needs general approval from the villagers (Rashtriya Sewa Bharati, 2004). The RSS news site Organiser (2009) also confirms

this, stating that "at every level" the one-teacher schools seek "participation of local people". According to Organiser (2009) this includes involving the villagers "in the creation of the school, the selection of the teacher, and the adaptation of the curriculum and schedule" as well as recruiting locals to "coordinate in training and other project-related issues at every level" (Organiser, 2009). Organiser (2009) also states that "the timing of the school is decided as per the convenience of the students". This evidence indicates that the Sangh Parivar when providing services involve the locals in these processes in order to adapt to them and satisfy them. I argue that people will be more open to receiving services from someone local. If one initially were somewhat skeptical of either sending one's child to educational activities or receiving free medical services from an organization with an ideological agenda, it certainly helps that one knows, or knows of some of these service providers. Also, one could easily imagine that children from very poor families were unable to attend school due to having to work instead, and so adapting to the schedules of families is a clear way of attempting to get these people to use the Sangh's services, enabling trust-building. Thus, this evidence points towards the Sangh Parivar organizing efforts to adapt to local needs, and thus attempting to build trust.

The evidence also indicates that the Sangh Parivar thoroughly organize this service provision. As for the village-level healthcare workers, while working in their respective villages, they are supervised by "qualified medical doctors", and regularly meet with other village health workers, discussing challenges and receiving further training (Rashtriya Sew Bharati, 2004). Furthermore, every ten one-teacher school unit is "under the charge of one senior worker and 30 centres each are supervised and guided by senior and experienced supervisor" (Rashtriya Sew Bharati, 2004). The Sangh Parivar's contention of how well-organized and thought-through these programs are speaks to them truly making an effort to make these programs run smoothly, train people and hold them accountable to higher parts of the Sangh Parivar, in order to please these communities that receive services. Thus, the thorough organizing of the service projects contributes to locals continuing to use them, enabling the Sangh Parivar to gain their trust.

Other evidence points toward the organization of these project not being as thorough. According to the Hindustan times (Siddiqui, 2014), the one-teacher schools are not run very professionally, with poorly trained teachers. Siddiqui (2014) finds that these schools entirely depend on the given teacher, who is usually a local youth, supposedly selected by the local village council "but in reality are selected by the regional" in-charge full-time of the RSS.

This evidence rises doubt as to whether these workers actually are locally selected, and the degree to which one-teacher schools are professionally run. However, this journalist refers to the Northeast region, and there is likely to be some variation as to how this is actually practiced throughout all of India. Nevertheless, evidence from this article suggests we should be skeptical to whether the Sangh actually selects local service persons and organize one-teacher schools professionally, and thus whether they care to provide the best fitted services to these local communities.

Secondary sources also indicate that the Sangh Parivar has been attempting to build trust through services, and by portraying themselves as apolitical so as to make inroads with the population. According to Vaishnav (2019, p. 12), the Sangh Parivar's service provision aimed at the lower castes "emphasized welfare over ideology". Bhattacharjee (2021, p. 7) corroborates this, saying that the RSS has worked to make their service provision appear apolitical and benevolent, helping inaugurate "a large number of supporters within its fold". According to Bhattacharjee (2021, p. 8) to the degree that the beneficiaries are those who were unable to obtain services elsewhere, they feel indebted to the Sangh and seek to show their gratitude through becoming members, mobilizing others and/or voting for the BJP. Thachil's (2011) study of the Sangh Parivar's service provision in Chhattisgarh found that an important way for them to gain trust in Adivasi villages was to appear apolitical and not force Hindu nationalism onto the villagers, instead being clearly committed to service, at least in the initial phase of service provision (2011, p. 449). This evidence from secondary literature further underscores how the Sangh Parivar has been attempting to gain access to disadvantaged segments of society by attempting to appear apolitical and nonideological when providing services, which I take as important evidence for how the Sangh has been seeking to build trust through service provision.

Furthermore, evidence suggest the Sangh Parivar's top leadership is making an effort to establish themselves as a non-political organization. RSS spokesperson Mohan Bhagwat stated that the RSS has "no connection with politics" even adding that "elections mean nothing to us" (Nirala, 2020). In another context, Bhagwat stated to The Hindu that "Sangh is not a political organisation but a social one" ("Will never interfere in functioning of BJP govt", 2014). Furthermore, senior RSS person Hosbale when asked whether the Sangh Parivar works in the Northeast region due to BJP being weak in these areas, answers that the Sangh has been working here for decades, "and hence there is no political agenda in our work", "It is purely for the cultural unification and unity of the nation" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,

2014). I think it points to how journalists are attentive to some of the same mechanisms that this thesis explores, which the RSS is accustomed to having to refute. Various leaders seek to distance themselves from the BJP. Top RSS person Manmohan Vaidya, in the context of discussing the BJP's 2014 election win, speaks of how the RSS had simply "appealed for registering maximum voters and 100 percent voter turnout" (Vishwa Samvad Kendra, Bharat, 2014). This is also underscored in the RSS ABPS report (from the RSS' executive council), stating that it is important to ensure 100 percent voter turnout and to stay "out of day to day politicking and party politics and remaining within our limits" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2012). Another top RSS person, Dattatraya Hosbale states that "Sangh only expects higher voter turnout which will help in the democratic process, keeping the country's interest at the highest" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2014). The 2014 and 2019 ABPS reports also keep repeating that people should vote while still indicating that the government should be switched out in 2014 and that the Modi government has done a good job in the 2019 report (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2017; Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh 2019). The Sangh Parivar clearly tries to communicate that it is an apolitical organization simply seeking higher voter turnout. While there most likely are fractions within the Sangh Parivar who genuinely want to stay out of politics, I think the evidence point towards them at least wanting to be perceived as apolitical. The Sangh Parivar clearly has a strong incentive to be perceived as apolitical as opposed to playing a role in the BJP's campaign, but as we shall see they certainly have even though they are reluctant to admit this. Thus, I find the Sangh's utterings on not being a political organization, simply wanting to increase voter turnout, to constitute evidence of them attempting to appear apolitical, which likely helps the Sangh Parivar grassroots workers appear apolitical in their service provision as well.

To conclude, I find that the evidence indicates that the Sangh did try to organize their projects to adapt to local needs as well as to appear apolitical. This way they could gain these people's trust and only then go on to try to ideologically convince them and/or sway their votes. Evidence indicate that the Sangh Parivar uses local people in their service provision and let the local communities have a say in the organizing of these programs. Although there are some doubts tied to the extent to which the Sangh Parivar generally allows for local selection of healthcare workers and teachers as well as how professionally these programs are run, I take the Sangh's own account of this as rather sound evidence since they have such clear incentives to be perceived as trustful. According to my argument, precisely because these communities have often been targets of forces wanting to either use them for clientelism or

forcibly convert them, the Sangh would have to actually gain their trust and not just seek to exploit them. That is, it benefits the Sangh Parivar organizations to adapt to local conditions by selecting local, selfless persons to run these projects and to maintain a solid structure and high accountability, which gives this evidence leverage. On the contrary, if these people were mostly sent from central headquarters, without any connection to the local community, then people would be less likely to make use of these services. Scholarly literature furthermore corroborates this narrative of the Sangh Parivar attempting to appear apolitical and benevolent in their service provision. Furthermore, statements from top Sangh Parivar leaders underscore how these organizations claim to be apolitical, simply wanting to increase voter turnout. Such claims from organizational leaders likely make it easier for grassroots service providers to be perceived as apolitical and thus more trustworthy in their service provision. Thus, the evidence indicate that the Sangh Parivar has attempted to organize efforts to adapt to local needs, and to appear apolitical in order to have disadvantaged segments of society use their services and create bonds of trust.

5.1.2. Ideological conviction in classrooms and beyond?

Establishing that the Sangh Parivar has attempted to build trust among disadvantaged segments of society, I now move on to analyzing whether the evidence indicate that they have furthermore attempted to ideologically convince children and wider communities through education. Ideological conviction through the Sangh Parivar's service provision is likely to take place in many different ways, but teaching, curriculum and related activities are more measurable and are good arenas for ideological conviction. It has been somewhat difficult to find data on this, with the Sangh Parivar being reluctant to detail where and how they provide education, and trying to appear to provide services not due to recipients' social background but rather due to inaccessibility (Sarkar, 1994). This indicates that the Sangh does not want to be perceived as attempting to ideologically convince certain segments of society, probably somewhat limiting extent of data on this. Nevertheless, several pieces of evidence point towards the Sangh attempting to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society through its different educational offers.

Various evidence points towards the importance of ideological curriculum in the Sangh's educational offers. Sundar (2004, p. 1611) states that "in RSS schooling, curricular and extra-curricular messages such as uniforms, functions or cultural knowledge exams all serve to

remove non-Hindus from the discursive space of the nation". Through these seemingly innocent practices, "this is legitimised as just an alternative form of education" (2004, p. 1611). While the Sangh Parivar are skilled at making their educational offer appear simply as a natural part of Hindu culture, according to Sundar (2004, p. 1611) "the RSS pedagogical project is distinct from all other schools in the harnessing of pedagogy to a clear political end". What is more, a 1996 report from the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) stated that "the Vidya Bharati schools are being clearly used for the dissemination of blatantly communal ideas" and that parts of their curriculum were "designed to promote bigotry and religious fanaticism in the name of inculcating knowledge of culture" (Ramakrishnan, 2012; Siddiqui, 2014). This evidence points towards the Sangh Parivar seeking to ideologically convince children through curriculum and teaching.

While it varies what kind of curriculum these schools use, evidence indicates that teaching and more informal extracurricular activities also play an important part in ideological conviction. Where national textbooks are used, Sarkar (2019) found that schools then tend to use "supplementary aids" to align students with Hindu nationalism, such as maps showing undivided India, icons postered around the schools and discussion of "Muslim oppression" during assembly meetings (Sarkar, 2019, p. 162). According to Sarkar (2019, p. 162), the teaching of the Hindu nationalist historical narrative is "non-stop", and "not confined to the classroom, the syllabus, or to fixed school hours". Sarkar contends that "the really virulent anti-Muslim messages are, as yet, delivered orally in schools, camps and shakhas", and through other extra-curricular activities (2019, pp.164-165). Thus, perhaps more importantly than the curriculum itself, the Sangh Parivar schools seem to spread Hindu nationalism in even more subtle, not as easily observable ways. The use of Hindu symbols in classrooms and oral messages at assemblies and extracurricular camps makes the reproduction of Hindu nationalism appear banal, as a natural part of everyday life that might go unquestioned (Billig, 2012). Thus, ideological conviction of children seems to happen not just through curriculum and formal teaching but just as much through oral messages in schools and through extracurricular activities, as well as through banal symbols in school premises.

Evidence indicates that also the most basic of the Sangh's educational offers help disseminate their majoritarian ideology. According to Sarkar (1994, p. 11), the one-teacher schools referred to as "Samskar Kendras" focus on "elementary literacy and lessons in religion, patriotism" and "Indian culture". A core aspect of these schools, at least in tribal areas, is to instill in tribals Hindu nationalist values (Sarkar (1994). According to Ramakrishnan (2012),

the one-teacher schools promote "Hindutva communalism". In slum communities observed in Bengaluru, tutoring centers provided by a Sangh-affiliated organization composed "their own curriculum using textbooks published by the RSS", and the teaching "helped disseminate majoritarian narratives through an emphasis on religio-cultural rituals" (Chidambaram, 2022, p. 106). According to Chidambaram, Hindu mythology was "seamlessly connected to historical events and patriotism, thus grounding nationalism in Hindu beliefs" (Chidambaram, p. 106). This evidence indicates that the Sangh Parivar attempts to ideologically convince also through its most basic educational offers, through teaching and textbooks provided by the Sangh Parivar.

Evidence further indicates that education is used as an entry into communities which Hindu nationalists previously had difficulties reaching and that teachers function as a medium between the Sangh Parivar and these communities. According to Siddiqui (2014) the one-teacher schools "serve a medium of contact with the villagers and the teacher is the eyes and ears of the Sangh", keeping "the organisation updated of what is happening in the village" This indicate that the Sangh is attempting to influence local communities. According to Sarkar (1994, p. 13), Sangh Parivar's schools constantly mix "the domestic space" with the educational one. There are "frequent parent-teacher meetings" as well as home visits by the teachers. According to Sarkar (1994, p. 13), "the students, who are recruited from neighborhood areas, are entry points for the RSS institutions and organizations into larger localities". The Sangh Parivar affiliated news organization, Organiser, even states that in one village, the setting up of a one-teacher school had led the death rate to decline from 70 to seven percent, as the villagers were "persuaded to take medical treatment" (Organiser, 2009). According to Organiser, a one-teacher school conference revealed that such stories were a recurrent, "showing the integrated development of villages" through these one-teacher schools (Organiser, 2009). The Organiser article also points to how one-teacher schools are at the center for several other activities besides education, such as starting self-reliance projects, spreading "health awareness" and eradicate superstition (Organiser, 2009). The evidence from scholarly literature and news articles, notably the Sangh Parivar-run Organiser thus indicate that the Sangh Parivar is using education to get inroads with wider communities, with teachers observing communities on behalf of the Sangh Parivar and frequently interacting with the students' parents. This evidence has such leverage because the Organiser corroborates how education contributes to "integrated development" by being at the center for provision of many activities involving whole communities. Thus, the evidence indicates that the Sangh

Parivar has used education as an entry point to reach wider communities, allowing for ideological conviction through everyday conversations and activities, or simply legitimating the Sangh Parivar in the eyes of these communities.

Other evidence, however, raises some doubt as to whether the Sangh Parivar has been attempting to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society through curriculum and teaching. Firstly, the Vidya Bharati's more formal schools are more similar to the government-run ones. Some of these schools follow state syllabus but then again do include "yoga, Sanskrit and moral and spiritual education" (Siddiqui, 2014). This evidence points towards attempts at ideological conviction in formal schools perhaps being less vigorous. Furthermore, according to the Hindustan times (Siddiqui, 2014), the one-teacher schools in contrast to the more formal schools lack a concrete curriculum and do not hold as high quality. This could point towards the Sangh Parivar not being as invested in or perhaps unable to control what goes into the teaching in one-teacher schools, pointing towards ideological conviction not being as vigorous in these schools. Thus, this evidence indicates that some of the more formal schools of the Vidya Bharati might not differ that much from government-run ones, and that there is some uncertainty regarding how much control the Sangh has in running one-teacher schools. Even though some schools might use state curriculum and some one-teacher schools might be less structured and perhaps not under as strict control by the Sangh Parivar, evidence discussed above suggest that extracurricular activities still contribute to ideological conviction in both formal and less formal schools.

While the analysis above presents some compelling evidence in line with my hypothesized mechanism, there could be other explanations as for why the Sangh Parivar would want to build trust and ideologically convince these segments of the population. Although this thesis focuses on the mechanisms by which the Sangh Parivar help the BJP electorally, electoral politics is clearly only one way through these organizations seek to fulfill their vision of India (Andersen & Damle, 2019, p. xviii; Bhatty & Sundar, 2020, p. 632; Thachil, 2011, p. 442). Attempts at ideologically convincing Dalits and Adivasis might contribute to these communities increasingly voting for the BJP, as I argue. However, the Sangh Parivar, in accordance with Hindu nationalist ideology, also seeks to integrate these groups into Hindu society, as their being on the outside stands in the way of a united Hindu society. Parts of the Sangh Parivar probably truly want to keep this family of organizations outside the domain of politics, simply working to slowly ideologically convince the population into becoming one, united Hindu nation. Thus, the evidence analyzed above probably also reflect the Sangh

Parivar's attempts at ideologically convincing these segments of the population in its own right. However, whether the intention behind attempts at ideological conviction are to get these people to increasingly vote BJP and/or to slowly move towards a united, Hindu nation, these attempts might still contribute to driving the BJP vote, in line with my argument.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the Sangh Parivar has been attempting to ideologically convince through education. While some more formal schools employ state curriculum, evidence indicates that extracurricular activities, oral messages and banal expressions of nationalism might be even more important to ideologically convince than curriculum itself. Evidence also indicates that teaching and curriculum in the more basic educational offers contributes to ideological conviction. To the extent that children through the Sangh Parivar's various educational offers become ideologically convinced, they should be more inclined to vote Hindu nationalist once they are eligible to vote. Perhaps even more crucially, though, evidence indicates that education is used as an entry point to larger communities, serving as a focal point for "integrated development". This enables the Sangh to not only seek to ideologically convince children by way of education, but also larger communities, as a result of frequent contact through several arenas. Thus, I find that the evidence indicates the Sangh Parivar attempting to convince not only children but wider communities through education. To the extent that these people actually become ideologically convinced or even just accustomed to majoritarian discourse, they might be more likely to also vote Hindu nationalist, or at least more easily convinced to vote BJP if these people whom they trust discuss such matters with them around election time.

5.1.3. Awareness campaigns – as innocent as it sounds?

Above I showed how evidence point towards the Sangh Parivar attempting to ideologically convince students through education, which also enabled access to wider communities. I am now moving on to looking at whether the Sangh Parivar has attempted to turn its trustful relations and overall legitimated status among disadvantaged segments of society into votes through election-related activity.

Evidence from various sources underscore the Sangh Parivar's commitment to the BJP, ahead of the 2014 and 2019 national elections. According to Andersen and Damle (2019, p. 4), after the 2009 elections the RSS decided it wanted to work towards getting Congress out of government in fear of being restricted due to accusations of terrorism, and also Modi emerged

as a good candidate for prime minister. Vaishnav (2019, p. 12) corroborates this, stating that with the Sangh Parivar considering stakes to be high, "the RSS was mobilized on behalf of the BJP's 2014 campaign in a manner that had not been seen since 1977", after the Emergency. The Business Standard, also contends that the RSS is "an inseparable part of the BJP's larger poll machinery", helping the BJP notably in the 2014 national elections, and also 2019 elections ("Men, machinery and mind of RSS", 2019). The Sangh Parivar then continued its door-to-door campaigns ahead of the 2019 elections (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020, p. 161; Ramachandran, 2019). RSS worker Omprakash Sisodia stated to Times of India that RSS workers in the 2019 election would be knocking on doors "in small groups and meet people even in the remotest areas" (Naveen, 2019). Accordingly, this evidence from scholars and news outlets clearly indicates that Sangh Parivar has been helping the BJP electorally in the 2014 and 2019 national elections but does not go into as much detail regarding how this was done.

While the Sangh Parivar seemingly wants to be perceived as apolitical, various statements from the Sangh leadership indirectly indicates support for the BJP and of campaigning efforts. After the 2014 election, Manmohan Vaidya indirectly addressed the relationship between the RSS and the BJP. Vaidya stated that "the RSS appealed to the people to discard the communal and divisive politics of the UPA and vote for a nationalist, efficient and stable government", saying also that the RSS' volunteers "went door to door to create awareness", in an "awareness campaign" (Vishwa Samvad Kendra, Bharat, 2014). According to Vaidya, "these collective efforts have given these results", referring to the election results which were in the BJP's favor (Vishwa Samvad Kendra, Bharat, 2014). He thus indicates that the Sangh Parivar's awareness campaigns contributed to the BJP's victory. The RSS' general secretary similarly said of the 2019 election that the RSS would campaign "to ensure 100% voting, and that Ram Temple will be constructed in Ayodhya", which has been an important cause for Hindu nationalists (Naveen, 2019). The general secretary also said that "the common people know who works for the betterment of the nation" (Naveen, 2019). This stated focus on increasing turnout and voting for a nationalist party, one that embodies the qualities of the BJP, seems to mirror how these awareness campaigns played out on the grassroots level as elaborated on below. I thus find the evidence to indicate that the Sangh Parivar has conducted election-related activity in the form of awareness campaigns, however I will be triangulating this with data from the grassroots level below.

Evidence further suggests that senior BJP leaders are more open about the work the Sangh Parivar conducts for them prior to elections. A senior BJP leader stated that "The RSS plays an important role during elections", by e.g. registering voters and "organizing door-to-door campaigns" (Gadgil, 2018). However, according to this same senior BJP leader, RSS officeholders will "never" appear together with the BJP on a stage, as "they remain in the background and work silently" (Gadgil, 2018). The same senior leader also states that "two or three months before elections, RSS volunteers under the banner of the Matdat Jagruti Manch (Forum for Awakening Voters) start doing the round of the areas assigned to them" (Gadgil, 2018). According to this same BJP leader, the focus of these campaigns is to underscore the importance of voting and talk about campaign issues, "but they do not tell voters who to vote for," (Gadgil, 2018). BJP national secretary Sunil Deodhar stated to the same newspaper that "RSS volunteers are at work round-the-year", which "helps the BJP at the time of elections" (Gadgil, 2018). This evidence thus details how, according to the BJP, RSS campaigning takes up before the election, with door-to-door campaigning, reminding people to vote, and discussing issues, without mentioning the BJP but rather seeking to be perceived as removed from the BJP publicly. Thus, this evidence from senior hold of the BJP points towards the Sangh Parivar conducting election-related activity in favor of the BJP, as seen before the 2019 national elections, which I will seek to triangulate with evidence from the grassroots level below.

News articles detailing the RSS' efforts on the grassroots level ahead of the 2022 Uttar Pradesh state assembly elections shed more light on the contents of these awareness campaigns outlined above. The RSS had set up multiple efforts in the state prior to these elections, such as call centers, making pamphlets, going door to door and holding various in-person and online events and meetings. According to an RSS worker, "We do not tell [people] who to vote for. But we remind them about the country's interests, so that they can choose accordingly. Our leaflets and our slogans never mention the BJP anywhere" (Das, 2022). From a call center, another worker reminded people to vote on election day "no matter which party you support", adding however "but, before you vote, think about whether you want to be on the side of those who are building the Ram Temple, or those who want to erase the name of Ram from this country. Whether you want to support those who are bent on breaking Kashmir, or those who want to keep it together" (Das, 2022). While not mentioning the BJP by name, these are causes which the BJP has strong ownership to. Furthermore, an Uttar Pradesh BJP functionary underscores how important the RSS workers are for the BJP's

campaign owing this to their wide reach in Uttar Pradesh, largely due to them not employing the BJP's symbols in their events but holding "small events" and having an "indirect appeal" (Srivastava, 2022). Accordingly, evidence shows that the Sangh's grassroots workers have been approaching people asking them to vote, but to vote based on issues to which the BJP has strong ownership, although without mentioning the BJP by name nor show their symbols. The evidence from Uttar Pradesh thus shows that the Sangh Parivar, by keeping a distance to the BJP, removing themselves from dirty politics, are able to appeal to people about the BJP in an indirect way, through awareness campaigns.

The Sangh Parivar also conducted awareness campaigns ahead of the 2021 Bengal assembly elections. An RSS functionary stated that more than 5000 RSS volunteers, "associated with more than 25 organizations", took part in these campaigns in Bengal (Bhattacharya, 2021). Bengali RSS spokesperson Biblap Roy said that the RSS' campaign requests people to "ensure 100 percent turnout", to not vote blank, and to "keep important issues in mind" when voting (Bhattacharya, 2021). According to Bhattacharya (2021) "this is predominantly done through RSS volunteers meeting with groups of people". According to Roy "we don't seek votes for any particular party", instead "we remind the people of the main issues", such as socioeconomic decline, the problem of "infiltration", and the "lack of democratic space", which corresponds with issues frequently addressed by the BJP's national leadership. The RSS' student wing and labor wing had put up posters asking people to "not bring danger to your door by voting for the appeasers" and to "vote for the nationalist force to save Nabadwip's females from 'love jihad'", respectively. While the BJP is not mentioned by name, the public is asked by organizations clearly affiliated to the Sangh Parivar to not vote for the opponent, but to vote based on Hindu nationalist, divisive issues. Thus, while claiming to be apolitical this evidence from Bengal again indicates that these awareness campaigns rather than seeking to increase turnout as such are asking people to vote based on issues to which the BJP has strong ownership, again without mentioning the BJP by name.

Evidence from the 2016 assembly elections in Assam also shows how the Sangh Parivar conducted awareness campaigns. A "senior RSS functionary", stated that "around 20,000 to 25,000 cadres worked for BJP", organized "voter awareness camps and ensured that people come out to vote for change" (Singh, 2016). More specifically, according to this source, the RSS targeted one million "new voters and managed to pull them towards BJP" (Singh, 2016). The leader added, "our education programme in the tea estates has ensured that we get the backing of tea tribes and other tribal communities" (Singh, 2016). On the one hand, he is

clearly stating that a large number of RSS workers actually worked for the BJP, thus supporting that the notion that the Sangh Parivar conducted election-related activity to sway votes in favor of the BJP. On the other hand, the Sangh Parivar has incentive to appear as thriving, and so these numbers could be exaggerated. But as shown repeatedly above, the Sangh Parivar has much to gain from appearing as apolitical, and thus statements admitting to cooperating with the BJP has quite some inferential weight. Furthermore, these statements triangulate the evidence from the national elections and from Uttar Pradesh of the RSS arranging awareness campaigns, ensuring people vote "for change", but also directly states that the RSS managed to "pull voters" towards the BJP. The most valuable part of this evidence is however that this person directly ties the service provided by the Sangh Parivar to people in the tea estates to expecting they received these people's votes in the election. Thus, the evidence from the 2016 Assam elections show that the Sangh Parivar has again been conducting an awareness campaign seeking to sway votes in favor of the BJP, even working for the BJP, and that they expected their service provision in certain areas to generate votes for the BJP.

According to Jafferlot and Verniers (2020, pp. 161-162), during the 2019 elections, the volunteers, whether from the RSS or the BJP, would claim to just want to increase voter turnout, but then "gradually tried to persuade them to vote for the BJP". I argue that it is the personal relationship and overall legitimation of the Sangh Parivar that enables them to effectively campaign this way. However, Jaffrelot and Verniers' (2020) claim that workers were also from BJP suggests this would be just as easy for BJP workers, and suggesting trust-building would not take as long. This somewhat weakens my argument that it is the trust slowly built through service provision that allows the Sangh Parivar workers to effectively sway votes before elections. However, I think that BJP workers trying to campaign in ways similar to Sangh Parivar grassroots workers does not weaken my argument that grassroots workers are able to use their legitimation and trust built through service provision to try to sway votes.

Thachil (2011) convincingly argues that the Sangh in Chhattisgarh around election time subtly tried to make the villagers vote BJP, even documenting that many of them ended up doing so. Thachil (2011) for instance documents how a rumor was spread about a rival Congress politician, in the run-up to the 2003 election by Sangh Parivar activists, which proved highly successful "precisely because the rumor came from outside the formal political arena". According to Thachil (2011), activists hold the kind of meetings they regularly do in

the villages where they live and nearby ones, and dedicate part of the meeting to, in a seemingly apolitical way, "advocating particular candidates on the basis of their ability to serve" their community, as opposed to their Hindu nationalist ideology (Thachil, 2011, pp. 452-453). Thus, evidence from Thachil shows that activists in Chhattisgarh tried to subtly sway votes but without seeming aggressive or pressuring, and that the effects of service provision was significant (2011, p. 453).

Finding evidence of the electoral activity of organizations that seek to be perceived as apolitical has been somewhat challenging. As put by Das (2022) "If there is anything that is almost impossible to track during an election process, it is the RSS' involvement". I therefore used evidence from various elections to determine whether the Sangh Parivar has been attempting to sway votes towards the BJP as theorized. Even if the evidence stems from various contexts, sources indicate that these strategies are reused (Srivastava, 2022). I find that statements from the Sangh Parivar admitting to cooperating with the BJP and having election campaign strategies are costly statements for them to make, as they have every incentive to be perceived as not cooperating, or at least as apolitical. Although trying to appear removed from dirty politics, evidence clearly indicate that the main goal was not, as they claim, to increase voter turnout in general, but to increase the BJP vote. I believe this evidence, although from various contexts and elections, constitutes sound evidence, given that I have been able to triangulate with a substantial number of sources.

In conclusion, evidence from Sangh Parivar's and the BJP's own sources at various levels, as well as from a variety of news sites and scholarly literature indicates that the Sangh Parivar has conducted election-related activity. Firstly, various sources indicate that the Sangh Parivar helped the BJP in 2014 and 2019 elections. Moreover, I found that leading RSS figures subtly admitted to conducting so-called awareness campaigns. Leading BJP figures, on the other hand, willingly admitted that the Sangh Parivar played an important part in their campaigning, corroborating the narrative of door-to-door campaigning, while also elaborating on how the Sangh Parivar allegedly create awareness around voting while discussing campaign issues but not explicitly telling people whom to vote for. While this evidence indicates that this type of campaigning took place in the 2014 and 2019 national elections, I further demonstrated that this seems to be a familiar way of campaigning for the Sangh Parivar as shown in state elections. Evidence from the Uttar Pradesh 2022 and Bengal 2021 legislative assembly elections quite accurately corroborate the evidence from the BJP leaders, indicating that the Sangh Parivar conducted awareness campaigns by approaching people, asking them to vote,

but to vote based on issues that the BJP has strong ownership to, and without mentioning the BJP by name or using their symbols. Evidence also indicates the use of awareness campaigns in the 2015 Assam legislative assembly elections but not in as great detail. Interestingly, though a senior Assamese RSS functionary stated that they were expecting votes from disadvantaged segments of society to whom they had provided educational services, which is in line with my argument. While Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) alluded that BJP and Sangh Parivar workers might have worked according to much of the same approach, I argue that this does not lessen my argument about how the Sangh Parivar works to sway votes. Taken together I thus find that this evidence from various contexts and elections indicate a clear pattern of the Sangh Parivar conducting awareness campaigns, indirectly asking people to vote for the BJP. Given that I argued that the Sangh Parivar seems to have created trustful relations to disadvantaged segments of society, I argue that these vote-swaying efforts should result in these people increasingly voting for the BJP.

5.1.4. Conclusions

This part has examined whether CSOs' regular service provision creates trust as well as broader societal legitimation, enabling ideological conviction and/or vote swaying by testing for the presence of multiple observable implications.

Firstly, I have examined whether the Sangh has been organizing their efforts to adapt to local needs, as well as striving to be perceived as apolitical. The evidence indicates that the Sangh has probably largely used local, approved service providers and run these programs rather professionally, which they have incentive to. Scholarly literature corroborates the narrative of the Sangh Parivar attempting to appear political and benevolent. Also, top Sangh Parivar leaders seem to try to portray the organization as apolitical, which is likely to make service provision on the grassroots level more trustworthy as well. With the Sangh seemingly making such efforts to adapt to the local populations in order to have them use their services and create bonds of trust, this enables them in the long run to affect them ideologically and/or sway their votes towards the BJP.

Furthermore, I have been testing whether the Sangh Parivar has been attempting to ideologically convince disadvantaged segments of society through education. The evidence indicates that both more formal and the simplest of the Sangh's educational offers use ideological curriculum and teaching. However, the extracurricular activities, oral messages

and banal expressions of Hindu nationalism that come with the Sangh's education might be even more important. Even more crucially, evidence indicate that education is used to enter larger communities by serving as a focal point for several activities. This fits with my argument in the sense that ideologically convinced people, or people affected by majoritarian discourse, are probably more likely to vote Hindu nationalist due to ideological conviction, or at least more easily affected by the Sangh Parivar's campaigning.

Furthermore, evidence from various levels within the Sangh Parivar and the BJP, as well as from a variety of news sites point towards them conducting election-related activities in favor of the BJP ahead of the 2014 and 2019 elections, in the form of subtle "awareness campaigns. There is a recurrent pattern of the Sangh Parivar's various organizations in various elections approaching people to remind them to vote, based on issues that the BJP has strong ownership to, although without explicitly naming the BJP or using party symbols. Arguing that the Sangh Parivar is trusted or at least legitimated among disadvantaged segments of society and/or that people have adopted a Hindu nationalist ideology, these awareness campaigns should, according to my argument, make disadvantaged segments of society increasingly vote for the BJP.

Taken together, this evidence indicates that the Sangh has been attempting to build trust, mainly through organizing their efforts accordingly, using local people in their services and trying to be perceived as apolitical. I also find that the Sangh seems to have been attempting to ideologically convince through education, also using this to make inroads with larger communities, as established by several sources of evidence. Lastly, I find that the Sangh seems to have conducted election-related activity, attempting to sway votes toward the BJP, but in subtle ways. Establishing this part of the mechanism, I now move on to analyzing whether this again led to those holding a favorable view of these CSOs contributing to the election of the BJP, and thus democratic backsliding.

5.2. Did service provision produce votes?

As evidence suggest that the Sangh Parivar has been able to build trust and legitimize itself among disadvantaged segments of society and thus to ideologically convince and/or help sway the votes of these people in favor of the BJP, this part will seek to establish whether these people actually went out and voted for the BJP. It is important to establish that many of the same people who were ideologically convinced and/or were affected by the Sangh

Parivar's vote swaying efforts actually contributed to the electoral victory of the BJP, in order to demonstrate that the Sangh's service provision actually has contributed to the ensuing democratic backsliding taking place in India.

I will be focusing on the 2014 and 2019 elections in particular, which is when the BJP got to power nationally, in what was considered by many as watershed elections, replacing the seemingly ever-dominant Congress party (Bajpai & Kureshi, 2022). While the Congress has dominated Indian politics since independence, the BJP has now taken its place (Varshney, 2019, p. 63). How this could happen, and especially now that the Modi-led BJP has contributed to severe democratic backsliding in what has been commonly regarded the world's most populous democracy, begs explanation. While there will almost always be a myriad of explanations for parties' performances in elections, this thesis focuses on whether the votes of disadvantaged segments of society might have played a role in the 2014 and 2019 national elections. That is, I am attempting to establish whether these groups' votes to some extent contributed to the BJP's electoral victories, and thereby to the democratic backsliding we have seen since Modi came to power.

It is particularly surprising for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes to be contributing to the BJP's victory as the party has traditionally been considered to represent upper caste interests, and Hindu nationalism as such has largely defended the practices of the caste system (Rukmini, 2019, p. 39; Thachil, 2009, pp. 1-2; Varshney, 2014, pp. 35-36). The BJP has been considered to have some support among the Other Backward Classes, but very little among the lower castes not to mention Muslims (Varshney, 2014, pp. 35-36). Congress, on the other hand has traditionally attracted both lower, middle and upper castes, as well as minorities such as Muslims (Rukmini, 2019, p. 39; Varshney, 2014, pp. 35-36). According to Thachil (2009, p. 5) "poor voters have largely been understood as constraining the BJP's success in Indian politics, not enabling it". With the BJP arguably not doing much to improve disadvantaged segments of society's conditions during its first term, we would not expect to see them increasingly vote BJP in 2019 (Jaffrelot, 2019, p. 153). As one would not at the outset expect disadvantaged segments of society to lend its support to an elitist, upper-caste party, I will in the following look into whether these groups nevertheless did increasingly vote for the BJP in 2014 and 2019, and thus contributed to democratic backsliding.

5.2.1. A shift in the lower caste vote: Towards consolidation of Hindus behind the BJP?

While the BJP traditionally has been regarded a party for the upper castes, evidence indicates that the lower castes increasingly voted for the party in 2014, contributing to its victory. One of the things that were surprising about the BJP's 2014 watershed election, gaining its highest ever number of seats, was that the party had managed to create a social coalition moving "beyond the party's traditional upper caste voter base" (Vaishnav, 2019, p. 12). While the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes made up 20 percent of the BJP vote in the mid-1990s, by 2014 they represented 25 percent (Verma, 2019, p. 35). Thus, from the 1996 to the 2014 election, the BJP's Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe vote share has increased by 5 percent compared to the Other Backward Class vote with 9 percent, while the upper castes vote went down by 14 percent. Clearly, by 2014 the BJP's vote share increasingly consisted of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes compared to the 1990s (Rukmini, 2019; Verma, 2019). Of the Scheduled Tribes electorate, 28 percent voted BJP in 2004, 24 percent in 2009 and 38 percent in 2014 (Kumar, 2020, p. 14). This was a record high vote share from Scheduled Tribes (Rukmini, 2019, p. 42). Of the Scheduled Castes electorate, 13 percent voted BJP in 2004, 12 percent in 2009, 24 percent in 2014 (Kumar, 2020, p. 13). Compared to the 2009 elections, the BJP gained more votes from disadvantaged segments of society than from other segments of society (Chhibber & Verma, 2014). The Scheduled Castes vote for the BJP doubled, from 12 to 24 percent, and the Scheduled Tribes vote increased with 14 percentage points, to 38 percent (Chhibber & Verma, 2014, p. 55; Kumar, 2020). Thus, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes increasingly voted for the BJP in 2014, making up a larger share of this elitist party's coalition, which I argue is partly due to the Sangh Parivar's service provision and subsequent trust-building, ideological conviction and/or vote-swaying.

The BJP's increased vote share among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of course came at the expense of other parties. In 2014 the BJP for the first time got more votes from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes than Congress did (Chhibber & Verma, 2014). The BJP received 24 percent of the Scheduled Caste vote while Congress received 18.5 percent, and 38 percent of the Scheduled Tribes vote while Congress received 28 percent (Rukmini, 2019, p. 42; Varshney, 2014, p. 36). Also, the BJP's strengthened vote share in Northern India came at the expense of parties catering to lower castes (Sridharan, 2014, p. 31). Thus, in 2014, the BJP increased its vote share largely at the expense of Congress, and in the North at the

expense of caste-based parties. I argue that it is plausible that the Sangh Parivar's service provision, enabling trust-building, ideological conviction and vote-swaying is one reason for voters that traditionally voted for Congress or caste-based parties to increasingly vote BJP instead.

Potentially speaking against my argument, however, is the fact that all social groups increasingly voted for BJP at the expense of Congress in 2014, except for Muslims (Varshney, 2014, pp. 35-36). The BJP garnered more votes than Congress from rich, middle-class, lower-class, and poor voters, as well as urban and rural voters (Sridharan, 2014, p. 24; Varshney, 2014, p. 36). According to Sridharan, "the BJP's lead narrows as we go down the income ladder, but at no level, even the poorest, did voters prefer the traditionally social-welfare–oriented Congress to the more free-market–favoring BJP" (2014, p. 24). The notion that the BJP increased its vote share among all groups, also compared to Congress, might seem to weaken my argument, indicating that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes voted for the BJP for the same reasons as other groups did.

There appears to have been a combination of several factors behind the BJP's ability to assemble such a broad coalition of voters in 2014. The main focus of the 2014 campaign was good governance and anti-corruption (Ganguly, 2019, p. 85; Sridharan, 2014, p. 26). Chhibber & Verma (2014, p. 50) contend that the BJP managed to mobilize its traditional socially conservative supporters as well as attract voters who want less economic government intervention, holding that the entire electorate had moved to the right on economic issues. One reason for this seems to have been the previous Congress-led governments' inability to effectively implement the welfare schemes they had promised. According to Chhibber and Verma (2014), those who did not benefit from such schemes were more likely to vote BJP in 2014. Furthermore, the so-called Modi factor is widely regarded to have been important for the BJP's large 2014 electoral victory (Rukmini, 2019, p. 38). Modi appeared as an attractive leader, having had great economic success when leading the state of Gujarat (Chhibber & Verma, 2014). Also, Modi was portrayed as an underdog, the son of a tea-seller, in stark contrast to the nepotistic Congress leadership. Other common explanations for the BJP's win are that the party was increasingly backed by big business and was better at exploiting the internet and the news cycle in general (Sridharan, 2014, p. 28). This evidence points towards disadvantaged segments of society voting based on the same issues as other voters, favoring the BJP's free-market policies, presented by the charismatic and successful Modi, while Congress failed to make good on its promises.

While disadvantaged segments of society might have been convinced to vote BJP for the same reasons as the rest of the electorate, I argue that attracting this group should be particularly hard for the BJP and that the Sangh Parivar's service provision might still have played a role. Iwanek (2021) points out how many analysts focused on the BJP's strong campaigning strategies and Modi's charisma, but then failed to recognize that the BJP had "finally capitalized on the decades of the RSS' social engagement strategy". Iwanek (2021) finds that the Sangh's dense network of organizations offering services "wherever and whenever the government does not deliver sufficiently", while promoting the BJP's ideas and enhancing its image, yielded dividends in 2014. Such slow-moving changes are of course more complex to pinpoint than the mere election campaign issues and strategies of the day. Thus, a successful campaigning strategy probably helped the BJP, but I find that this does not rule out the effect of the Sangh Parivar's trust-building efforts and thus ideological conviction and/or vote-swaying by the Sangh, although it certainly is difficult to separate the effects of the two. Thus, while the BJP was able to increase its vote share across social groups for several reasons, the evidence presented above points towards the Sangh Parivar's service provision enabling trust-building, ideological conviction and vote-swaying as being one reason for increasing the disadvantaged vote in 2014.

Contrary to most analysts' predictions, the BJP went on to increase its number of seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. This was unexpected, mainly because the economy had seen slow growth and the agricultural sector was in distress under its government. Nevertheless, the BJP won 37,7 percent of the total vote, a six percentage points increase from 2014, yielding a majority in the Lok Sabha (Varshney, 2019, pp. 63-64). The BJP thus got 55,8 percent of the Lok Sabha elected seats, relative to Congress' 9,6 percent of seats (Varshney, 2019, p. 64). This of course gave the BJP a powerful mandate, based on which the government would intensify its efforts of democratic backsliding.

As in 2014, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes increasingly voted for the BJP in 2019. While the Scheduled Caste vote had already doubled between 2009 and 2014, to 24 percent, it rose even further to 34 percent in 2019 (Kumar, 2020, p. 13; Kumar & Gupta, 2019; Varshney, 2019). The Scheduled Tribe vote also increased from an already high 38 percent to 44 percent in 2019 (Kumar, 2020, p. 14). Thus, the already high share of votes casted for the BJP by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in 2014 continued to increase in 2019, which lends support to my argument that the Sangh Parivar's service provision could have contributed to this.

People considered to reside in more disadvantaged areas also increasingly voted for the BJP in 2019. While it was thought unlikely that the BJP would be able to improve its vote share further in the West and the North, together with its allies the BJP notably gained a large number of seats in the Northeast region (Varshney, 2019, pp. 64-65). This region contains a large share of Scheduled Tribes, and the Sangh Parivar's presence there has been strong (Siddiqui, 2014). The BJP gained relatively most votes among the poor and in rural areas (Kumar & Gupta, 2019; Varshney, 2019, p. 65). The BJP vote share increased by "two and three percentage points in urban and semi-urban seats, respectively", compared to the seven points increase in the rural vote share, going from 30,3 to 37,6 percent (Kumar & Gupta, 2019; Varshney, 2019, p. 65). This tells us that people from more disadvantaged areas again went out to support the BJP in 2019, which could indicate that the Sangh Parivar's efforts in rural areas yielded dividends.

However, as in 2014 all classes increasingly voted for the BJP 2019, but the increase was most steep among the poor (Kumar & Gupta, 2019; Varshney, 2019, p. 65). While the upper classes were still the BJP's most eager supporters, the poor, lower and middle classes voted quite equally for the BJP in 2019. Among the poor, as much as 36 percent rallied behind the BJP in 2019 compared to 24 percent in 2014. Comparably, the middle class and the rich vote only increased by six percentage points (Varshney, 2019, p. 65). This tells us that the classes were more evenly voting for the BJP, with an increase across the board, the steepest increase being among the poor.

Thus, in 2019 all caste and economic groups, and urban as well as rural residents increasingly voted for the BJP. The increase for all these groups does not particularly favor the argument that disadvantaged segments of society by virtue of ideological conviction and/or vote swaying by the Sangh Parivar have ended up supporting the BJP to an even larger degree in 2019. Instead, as in 2014, this could indicate that several issues might have been important for broad segments of the electorate. According to Varshney, in the 2019 campaign the BJP again focused on good governance and attacking Congress and Modi as a person, as well as national security and Hindu nationalism (2019, pp. 66-67). Hindu nationalism was evident through candidate selection and anti-Muslim rhetoric from many BJP politicians, including Modi to some degree (Varshney, 2019, pp. 68-69). Again, Modi was an important factor (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020, p. 161; Palshikar et al., 2019). The percentage of voters who stated that they would have voted for another party if it were not for Modi rose from 25 percent in 2014 to 32 percent in 2019 (Varshney, 2019, p. 67). Varshney (2019, p. 65) contends that "many citizens

appear to have voted against their economic interests" and instead voted based on belief in Modi's leadership skills. During its first tenure the BJP government was also able to initiate certain measures in favor of the poor, such as provision of cooking gas and building of toilets, but these were mostly symbolic measures rather than substantively improving the lives of disadvantaged segments of society (Jaffrelot, 2019, p. 153). While the Modi factor in particular remains an important explanation for driving the general vote, including the disadvantaged vote, I argue that my explanation is still viable. It would be easier for disadvantaged segments of society to fall for Modi's populist appeal even though he did not provide them with much substantively from office, if the Sangh Parivar provide services and give the impression that the Hindu nationalist movement contributes to improving their lives. Also, the increased vote share being steeper for Scheduled Castes than for other groups does support the notion that the Sangh Parivar's' systematic targeting of these groups has yielded electoral dividends by bringing the BJP back to power with an even larger mandate. Thus, even though the BJP's vote share increased among all groups in 2019 for various reasons, as discussed above the Sangh Parivar's service provision might still have played an important role in increasing the disadvantaged vote.

Furthermore, for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to increasingly support the BJP through the ballot box has contributed to "a very substantial consolidation of Hindus (who compose about four-fifths of the populace) behind the BJP" (Varshney, 2019, p. 66). This is a clear contrast to how Congress used to rule based on an interreligious vote. Congress now only dominates within the non-Hindu minorities, which according to Varshey (2019, p. 66) "signals a kind of religious polarization that India has not witnessed since independence". The consolidation of Hindus behind the BJP suggests that the BJP has been able to mobilize based on religion and polarization, decreasing the salience of intra-Hindu cleavages while increasing the salience of particularly the Hindu-Muslim conflict. I argue that the Sangh Parivar's service provision on the grassroots level has been an important asset for the BJP to be able to mobilize the diverse group that Hindus constitute. I argue that it is plausible that the Sangh Parivar has contributed to the Hindu vote increasingly consolidating behind the BJP through its decades-long service provision among disadvantaged segments of society, generating trust and legitimation and thus enabling ideological conviction and vote-swaying in favor of the BJP.

In conclusion, evidence shows that the BJP increased its vote share among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes both in 2014 and 2019, which lends support to my argument that the

Sangh Parivar played a role in mobilizing these voters. However, in both elections, the BJP's vote share increased across most segments of the electorate, which suggests that the BJP was able to appeal to broad segments of society simply through strong campaigning based on salient issues, and notably Modi's charisma. However, I find that while there certainly are many reasons for why disadvantaged segments of society would vote for the BJP, evidence indicate that the Sangh Parivar's service provision nevertheless played an important role. That is, I find it likely that the Sangh Parivar has contributed to the BJP's electoral success in terms of building trustful relations to disadvantaged segments of society through service provision, allowing for ideological conviction and/or subtle attempts at vote swaying around election time. The Sangh Parivar's grassroots work has arguably allowed the BJP to focus more on upper castes and classes in their campaigning, while the vote share from disadvantaged segments of society has steadily increased. Also, the unexpected increase in votes from 2014 to 2019 speaks volumes of the BJP's overall legitimation in society, where it has been able to initiate severe measures of democratic backsliding and to still increase its mandate through elections. Thus, the evidence suggests that the BJP was able to increase its vote share among disadvantaged segments of society both in 2014 and 2019, thus securing large mandates by increasingly consolidating the Hindu vote, enabling the government to initiate majoritarian and undemocratic measures.

6. Discussion

Above I have analyzed the research question *how do Hindu nationalist civil society organizations have an influence on autocratization in India.* I argued that the Sangh Parivar's increased service provision has contributed to the democratic backsliding we see in India as a result of the Modi-led BJP's ascendence to government enabled by the mechanism I stipulated. The evidence indicate support for my hypothesized mechanism. Firstly, I argue that the evidence indicates that the Sangh Parivar did try to adapt to local needs and to appear apolitical in their service provision to create trust and legitimize themselves. Furthermore, the evidence suggest that the Sangh Parivar has attempted to ideologically convince through teaching, extracurricular activities and banal everyday symbols. What seems to be even more important for ideological conviction than the education itself, though, is the access that providing education grants the Sangh Parivar with wider communities. The evidence furthermore indicates that the Sangh Parivar has been conducting election-related activity in favor of the BJP through so-called awareness campaigns where the grassroots workers of the Sangh Parivar remind people to vote, but to do so based on issues that the BJP has strong ownership to, without mentioning the BJP by name. Furthermore, the evidence indicate that the beneficiaries and those holding a favorable view of the Sangh Parivar did increasingly vote for the BJP in 2014 and 2019, as demonstrated by the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe votes. While most groups increasingly voted for the BJP in both 2014 and 2019, I still find that the Sangh Parivar's efforts is one viable explanation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to rally behind the BJP, contributing to the government's large mandates based on the Hindu vote, and thus democratic backsliding.

One challenge in inferring whether the hypothesized mechanism was present is that the Sangh Parivar to a large extent deny being a political actor or attempting to ideologically convince people. The Sangh Parivar has strong incentives to deny this, since this serves to increase their credibility and legitimacy, enabling them to implement their agenda more efficiently. It is in fact expected as part of the mechanism that the Sangh Parivar would deny attempts at enhancing their agenda through ideological conviction and more direct vote-swaying. With such extensive evidence speaking in favor of their attempts of ideological conviction and vote-swaying, some of which stems from the Sangh Parivar itself, I find that organizational heads denying this does not condemn my argument much.

Not to mention there are clearly many other causes for why the BJP got to power nationally and for democratic backsliding in India than the BJP's service provision. Firstly, this thesis has assumed that the BJP once in power, and due to its large mandate, has been able to initiate democratic backsliding. There are many compelling explanations for democratic backsliding in India, such as institutional weakness or economic inequality. However, the democratic erosion under BJP represents a shift not witnessed since the Emergency under Indira Gandhi, who was in contrast rejected at the polls. I therefore think it makes sense to analyze the BJP's ascendence to power as a reason for democratic backsliding. The question of why people would choose to vote for the BJP has many more potential explanations. The finding that all segments of society increasingly voted for the BJP in 2014 and 2019 might indicate that the BJP was able to appeal to broad segments of society simply through strong campaigning based on salient issues. I have highlighted some of the most important alternative reasons for why disadvantaged segments of society would vote for the BJP besides the Sangh Parivar's service provision. Both in 2014 and 2019 the BJP's campaigning issues were largely focused on good governance and the economy, as well as Modi as a leader, while Hindu nationalism was more prominent in 2019 along with national security issues. While it seems puzzling that disadvantaged segments of society would increasingly vote for an elitist, upper-caste party, these explanations all have leverage. For disadvantaged segments of society to vote based on Modi's charisma, selling himself in as an underdog that could get things done, stands out as the most compelling alternative explanation. While my analysis has focused on how disadvantaged segments of society seem to have been influenced by strategies initiated by the Sangh Parivar, this is of course a diverse group which has many reasons for voting as they do besides being persuaded by Hindu nationalist service providers to ostensibly vote against their own interests. However, I believe other explanations such as the "Modi factor" and my explanation do not have to be mutually exclusive. Rather, the Sangh Parivar's service provision seems to have laid a foundation for the BJP's effective campaigning and populist appeal. Thus, most likely a combination of my argument and other factors such as Modi's appeal has been at play in mobilizing the disadvantaged vote behind the BJP, thus contributing to democratic backsliding.

Furthermore, the Sangh Parivar's service provision probably has affected democracy through other mechanisms besides the election of the BJP, aided by the increased disadvantaged vote (Thachil, 2011, p. 453). While outside the scope of this thesis, the efforts of ideological conviction analyzed above might negatively impact Indian democracy in several ways. Most

notably simply by making Indians more majoritarian and inclined to see interaction with the out-group as a zero-sum game. Where societies are mobilized according to salient cleavages such as the Hindu-Muslim one, people might cease to hold the government accountable for their implementation of majoritarian, undemocratic measures. While my contribution has focused on how service provision contributed to bringing the BJP to power in the first place, it is plausible that the grassroots work of the Sangh Parivar also helps the BJP to more efficiently consolidate its stance through democratic backsliding. As we have seen, Hindus across castes have contributed to bringing the Modi-led BJP to power first in 2014. And although the government in its first term increasingly moved away from the pluralist principles of the constitution, while not particularly delivering on its promises, these same groups increasingly supported the BJP in 2019. For Hindus to unite behind the BJP in this way could be a sign that majoritarianism is on the rise in India, which could provide fertile ground for parties such as the BJP to rise to power and to continue to impede upon democracy backed by large segments of the population.

In terms of theory development, my results are in line with Berman's theory, contradicting the neo-Tocquevillean notion that a dense network of CSOs will effectively aggregate people's interests and thus improve democracy. Just as was the case with Berman's (1997) analysis of Weimar's civil society, Indian Hindu nationalist civil society is dense and is arguably quite democratically organized. While Berman (1997) shows how the NSDAP were able to use the existing civil society network already in place to rise to power, the BJP instead springs out of the Hindu nationalist movement, and largely shares the BJP's vision of a Hindu nation. And while of course the NSDAP's rise to power resulted in the wholesale suspension of democracy, Indians are as of now only experiencing democratic backsliding. While CSOs providing people with services that they lack adequate access to sounds like a good thing, the analysis shows that we should pay attention to such developments at least to the extent that such organizations have aspirations to affect society along undemocratic lines. While deprived people get access to services that they need, the analysis has showed that this could contribute to democratic backsliding through intricate mechanisms. I thus contribute to the literature on social capital by showing how CSOs might use service provision as an effective tool to mobilize the disadvantaged vote as part of their effort to try to fulfill their majoritarian agenda.

Studying the relationship between the Sangh Parivar and the BJP is a complex task and might have had implications for the results of the analysis. While the analysis indicates that the BJP

has benefitted electorally from the Sangh Parivar's service provision, these organizations' unique grassroots presence is likely to be useful to the BJP in more ways than this analysis has taken into account. For instance, the Sangh Parivar is able to provide important feedback to the BJP, which the BJP might use to improve its campaigning as well as its governing. Most likely the BJP and the Sangh Parivar also influence each other in many ways, and the leadership in the BJP and the various outlets of the Sangh Parivar, especially the RSS are probably important in shaping these relationships. Also, it is probably not only the Sangh Parivar through its service provision that has legitimized the BJP. Quite likely the BJP's increasing success, not to mention the popularity of Modi, has made the Sangh Parivar appear more legitimate as well. I have also been analyzing the BJP and the broad set of organizations of the Sangh Parivar as rather unitary actors. In reality of course these are organizations which have their own cleavages to overcome. The complexity of the relationship between the Sangh Parivar and the BJP should not stop us from studying the Hindu nationalist movement but should compel us to formulate clear, testable hypotheses while keeping in mind these complexities.

Lastly, the results also indicate that the services provided by the Sangh Parivar has generated some of the same benefits typical for incumbent governments. Through the Sangh Parivar's service provision, the Hindu nationalist movement has had a chance to prove it is able to act and provide material improvements in people's lives even as it has been out of power politically. Iwanek (2021) speaks of how the Hindu nationalist movement has been able to gain popularity outside the electoral realm through the Sangh Parivar's service provision. The party and the CSOs are seemingly able to complement each other. CSOs might improve the party's reputation through service provision and other interaction that takes place on the grassroots level, while political parties may advance the movement's common agenda. This indicates that we should study CSOs and parties more like movements to uncover the complex ways in which they may affect societal development.

6.1. Implications for other contexts

If civil society activity takes place within rather than across cleavages, autocratic parties might take advantage of this to rise to power, meaning India could be considered a most likely case for bringing an autocratic party to power. While the Sangh Parivar has helped decrease the saliency of inter-caste conflict, it has contributed to increasing the saliency of religious

conflict lines, by focusing on what sets Hindus and Muslims in particular apart rather than what unites them. Certainly, in the case of India, large minorities are excluded from the majoritarian ideology that Hindu nationalist organizations seek to proliferate. In the sense that I was expecting, based on theory, for Hindu nationalist CSOs to negatively impact democracy, we might expect to find similar mechanisms in cases where many of the same conditions as in India are present. While the main aim of this thesis has not been to generalize, I nevertheless think the results could bear some implications for other contexts.

I believe my findings have implications for other contexts where dense networks of CSOs work within cleavages, and large segments of society lack access to basic services. This means findings mostly have implications for countries lacking a welfare state, for these organizations to have a broad appeal in the first place, and where such organizations do not work to decrease but rather increase the saliency of potent cleavages. My findings highlight how when people lack services that should have been provided by the state, this could lead to CSOs stepping in to provide such services. When organizations provide services to people in need they get unique access to them, and if such organizations are connected to a majoritarian party they may use these relationships to help such parties to power. The US is a context where similar mechanisms might play out. While the US and India are fundamentally different in many ways, both are large federal states with large segments of society that have inadequate access to public services. Both also have vigorous civil societies, and while Hindu nationalist organizations have strong ties to the majoritarian BJP, the Christian right in the US has increasingly been connected with the Republican party.

7. Conclusions

This thesis has answered the research question *how do Hindu nationalist civil society organizations have an influence on autocratization in India*. In short, Hindu nationalist civil society organizations have had an important influence on autocratization in India, by taking advantage of the vacuum left by the Indian state in terms of service provision. The Sangh Parivar's service provision seems to have enabled these CSOs to influence disadvantaged segments of society to vote for the majoritarian BJP, which once elected initiated large-scale democratic backsliding.

This thesis has built on the literatures of democratic backsliding and social capital as well as contributions on the Sangh Parivar's service provision in India. I contribute to these literatures by viewing service providing organizations working together with political parties as movements, highlighting how their cooperation could lead to democratic backsliding.

Building on this literature I developed a theoretical framework specifying how under certain conditions, increased service provision might lead to democratic backsliding by way of a mechanism split into two parts. Firstly, CSOs' increased service provision to disadvantaged segments of society enables trust-building and legitimization, enabling ideological conviction and vote-swaying. Secondly, beneficiaries and those holding a favorable view of these CSOs, increasingly vote for the party to which these CSOs are connected. The result is democratic backsliding under the given party.

To uncover whether this mechanism played out in India, I conducted a process tracing study. This enabled me to explore the mechanisms behind the Hindu nationalist organizations of the Sangh Parivar's increased service provision from the 1990s, and the BJP's contributions to democratic backsliding. I thus developed a set of observable implications for each part of the stipulated mechanism to guide me in the empirical enquiry. The data used mainly consists of scholarly literature, news articles and the Sangh Parivar's own accounts, provided both through news articles and their own reports.

The analysis indicates support for the stipulated mechanism. I find that the Sangh Parivar did likely attempt to build trust by organizing their efforts to adapt to local needs and striving to appear apolitical in their service provision. This seems to have enabled the building of trustful relationships. Subsequently the Sangh could to try to ideologically convince these segments of society as seen in the evidence through its majoritarian education, affecting both students, who would with time be eligible to vote, but also wider communities already eligible to vote.

Perhaps more visibly, it enabled the Sangh to try to sway votes in subtle ways, allowing it to reap the full benefits of being formally outside the political realm. Evidence indicates that Sangh workers urged Hindus to vote, and to do so based on issues largely overlapping with the campaigning issues of the BJP, but without mentioning the party by name. Accordingly, the evidence indicates that disadvantaged segments of society come election time did increasingly vote for the BJP compared to earlier years, first in 2014 and then in 2019 national elections.

The upper-caste, elitist BJP has thus increasingly consolidated the Hindu vote, across important cleavages such as caste and economic status. This was particularly surprising to many as the BJP traditionally has had little to offer these groups programmatically or ideologically. There are several other reasons for why disadvantaged segments of society, most notably the appeal of Modi. However, I argue that the Sangh Parivar's service provision and the influence this has yielded seems to have been one important reason, working in conjunction with other explanations such as the appeal of Modi. Thus, this thesis has gone beyond the relationship between the Sangh Parivar's increased service provision and democratic backsliding by uncovering the mechanism leading this cause to the outcome through process tracing. While the BJP managed to garner large vote shares from the lower castes, this vote is far from entirely consolidated behind the BJP. It remains to be seen whether this mechanism continues operate to increasingly mobilize these groups behind the BJP in the next general election taking place in 2024 and what might then be in store for the state of Indian democracy.

Future research should explore the link between subnational variation in vote share and national election outcomes. While the BJP performed poorly in the 2004 national elections, it did very well among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in some states while it did poorly in others (Thachil, 2011). This suggests that this mechanism was already in play in certain parts of India ahead of the 2009 elections. The BJP has had difficulties with increasing its vote share in Southern India in particular, where public welfare provision is largely better compared to the rest of India. This might suggest that where public services are more adequately provided, the Sangh Parivar's services are less needed, and thus these organizations are not as able to affect societal development. Studies have looked at some of these same dynamics taking place in various Indian states, but only looking at how this affects subnational democracy omits some important institutions that clearly are subject to backsliding, such as the Supreme Court, the Election Commision of India and the national

parliament, the Lok Sabha. Thus, future research should look at how variation in service-provision affects national-level election outcomes.

Lastly, while I have explored how the lack of basic services has created space for Hindu nationalist organizations' long-term service provision, thus contributing to democratic backsliding, future research should explore how various shocks could affect such mechanisms. While the Sangh Parivar has had a tradition of contributing with relief work during natural disasters and similar, future research should look into how shocks such as the Corona pandemic might affect autocratization through some of these same dynamics, in India and elsewhere.

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