

5th Political Science & Political economy Conference Titles and Abstracts

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Beyond Coethnicity: Political Influence in Ethnically Diverse Societies (with Neelanjan Sircar)

Abstract: In most emerging democracies, influential local citizens help shape the electoral choices of other voters. This article identifies these local actors, and in turn explores the extent to which these individuals ("influencers" hereafter) direct their influence towards voters from their own ethnic group vs. other groups. Contrary to common but simplistic assumptions, we argue that influence does not always flow along ethnic lines in ethnicized societies: voters are often likely to be influenced by non-coethnics. This is because diversity at the local level, if combined with the existence of a market for political influence at the local level, provides strong incentives for some of these individuals (namely, those who are far more influential than anyone else at the local level, or "dominant") to reach beyond coethnics. To test this argument, we deploy a novel empirical strategy to identify the main "influencers" across a large sample of villages in rural Bihar (India). We then rely on an innovative cross-referencing exercise between influencers and voters to compare the networks of "dominant influencers" vs. others. Results support our argument: when they have achieved dominance in the local market for influence (denoting that they are by far the most influential individuals at the local level), "influencers" are as likely to count coethnics as non-coethnics in their networks. These findings contribute to the empirical literature on political campaigns in India, and beyond, in ethnicized polities. They also help explain why ethnic preferences do not always transform into ethnic votes: namely, because the local-level networks through which many voters are mobilized and receive assistance are often multi-ethnic.

