

Democratic Backsliding and Election Campaigns: The Case of Bihar, India

Shivani Choudhary

Introduction

Over the past decade, scholars have documented a global pattern of democratic backsliding, in which elected leaders weaken democratic institutions while preserving the procedural facade of elections. Rather than collapsing through military coups, contemporary democracies increasingly erode through incremental institutional changes such as the weakening of judicial independence, constraints on civil society, and the consolidation of executive power (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). India, the world's largest democracy, has emerged as a particularly important case in this global trend. Since 2014, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been associated with a shift toward majoritarian nationalism and the centralization of political authority (Jaffrelot 2021; Hasan 2024; Gudavarthy 2023). Despite these developments, electoral politics in India continues to generate moments of contestation and democratic reinterpretation.

This paper examines how democracy is performed and interpreted during electoral campaigns in the Indian state of Bihar amid broader processes of democratic backsliding. Focusing on the 2025 Bihar state elections, the paper investigates how prospective voters (citizens), party workers, and regional and national political leaders articulate competing visions of democracy in campaign spaces. Rather than treating democracy solely as an institutional arrangement, I conceptualize it as an interpretive and performative process continuously remade through speech, ritual, script, mise-en-scene and political interaction. Electoral campaigns, I argue, function as arenas in which political actors stage competing performances of democratic legitimacy while citizens evaluate and reinterpret those claims.

Democratic Backsliding and Electoral Politics

The literature on democratic backsliding has primarily focused on how incumbents dismantle institutional constraints while maintaining electoral legitimacy. Political scientists describe backsliding as a gradual process through which elected leaders weaken democratic institutions from within (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Scholars further emphasize that such transformations often occur through legal and incremental mechanisms rather than abrupt authoritarian ruptures (Waldner and Lust 2018).

India provides an especially important case for examining these dynamics. Since 2014, the BJP government has pursued policies and political narratives associated with Hindu majoritarianism and the consolidation of executive authority (Jaffrelot 2021). Scholars argue that these developments have reshaped India's democratic institutions and public sphere (Hasan 2024; Gudavarthy 2023). At the same time, India's electoral system remains highly competitive. Opposition parties and regional political actors continue to contest dominant narratives and mobilize alternative political visions.

The persistence of electoral competition raises an important question: how does democratic meaning persist even when institutions are under strain? Existing research on elections has demonstrated that campaign periods are crucial moments in which political narratives circulate and influence voter perceptions (Lazarsfeld and Berelson 1965). Yet most studies treat campaigns primarily as instruments of persuasion rather than as cultural arenas in which democracy itself is interpreted and debated.

Campaigns as Performances of Democracy

To address this gap, this paper draws on cultural sociology and the anthropology of democracy to analyze electoral campaigns as performative events. Jeffrey C. Alexander's theory of cultural performance emphasizes that political legitimacy emerges through successful performances that align actors, audiences, and symbolic scripts (Alexander 2010, 2011). Political actors attempt to present themselves as authentic representatives of "the people" by mobilizing cultural codes, narratives, symbols, and emotional appeals that foster cultural extension and personal identification with audiences.

Populist politics relies particularly heavily on such performative strategies. Populist leaders construct moral narratives that position themselves as the authentic voice of "the people" against corrupt elites or threatening outsiders (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Moffitt 2017). In India, these narratives frequently intersect with religious identity, caste hierarchies, nationalism, and developmental rhetoric (Chakravartty and Roy 2015).

At the same time, audiences are not passive recipients of political messages. Cultural sociologists emphasize that audiences actively interpret political performances, making a performance successful when the leaders are able to fuse with the audience (Alexander 2011). Campaign rallies, therefore, function not merely as platforms for persuasion but as interactive arenas where legitimacy is collectively negotiated.

Anthropology of Democracy and Meaning-Making

Anthropological research further highlights the importance of everyday interpretation in sustaining democratic life. Julia Paley (2002) conceptualizes democracy as a social relation produced through interactions among citizens and institutions rather than simply a constitutional framework. Similarly, Mukulika Banerjee's ethnographic work demonstrates that democratic participation in India often functions as a moral and civic practice through which citizens affirm their political agency (Banerjee 2014).

Frederic Schaffer's (2014) work on democracy in translation provides an additional lens for understanding these dynamics. Schaffer argues that democratic concepts acquire distinct meanings as they are translated into local languages and moral frameworks. In India, terms such as "*loktantra*" (people's rule), "*samvidhan*" (constitution), and "*nyay*" (justice) often carry normative meanings that differ from the institutional concept of democracy. These linguistic translations reveal how citizens interpret democracy through locally grounded ethical frameworks.

This paper builds on these insights by examining how democratic meanings circulate and evolve within campaign discourse. Political leaders deploy particular narratives about democracy, while citizens interpret these narratives through their own moral vocabularies and political experiences.

Bihar as a Site of Democratic Contestation

The state of Bihar provides a particularly illuminating setting for examining these dynamics. Historically characterized by intense caste mobilization and populist rhetoric, Bihar has often been portrayed as a site of political fragmentation. The state has also been a center of vibrant opposition politics and regional party competition.

During the 2025 Bihar elections, multiple political actors articulated competing visions of democracy. Regional parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Janata Dal (United) mobilized narratives emphasizing social justice and constitutional equality, while the BJP and its allies foregrounded nationalism and development. These competing narratives transformed campaign spaces into arenas where multiple interpretations of democracy were publicly enacted.

Methods

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the Bihar election campaign between September and November 2025. The research combines participant observation at

campaign rallies and neighborhood meetings with interviews of party workers, journalists, and prospective voters.

Ethnographic observation enables analysis of the performative dimensions of political campaigning, including the staging of rallies, the use of slogans and symbols, and the emotional dynamics of crowd interaction. Interviews further illuminate how citizens interpret these performances and how they evaluate the authenticity and credibility of political actors.

Following interpretive ethnographic approaches (Geertz 2008), the analysis focuses on the meanings participants attach to democratic concepts rather than treating democracy solely as a set of institutional arrangements.

Performative Resilience

The findings suggest that electoral campaigns function as sites of democratic meaning-making even under conditions of institutional strain. Political actors deploy competing narratives about democracy, while citizens evaluate those narratives through their own moral frameworks.

In some cases, citizens express enthusiasm for strong nationalist leadership. In others, they emphasize values such as equality, dignity, and constitutional protection. These diverse interpretations demonstrate that democracy remains a contested and evolving concept within Indian political life.

Building on these observations, I introduce the concept of “*performative resilience*” to describe how democratic life persists through interpretive and performative practices. Even when formal institutions face pressure, democratic norms can endure through everyday acts of interpretation and collective performance. Ethnographic attention to electoral campaigns reveals democracy as an ongoing social process. Citizens and political actors alike participate in the continual redefinition of democratic meaning through collective performance.

Bibliography

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2010. *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2011. *Performance and Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Banerjee, Mukulika. 2014. *Why India Votes*. London: Routledge.

- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27(1):5–19.
- Bonikowski, Bart, and Noam Gidron. 2016. "The Populist Style in American Politics: Presidential Campaign Discourse, 1952–1996." *Social Forces* 94(4):1593–1621.
- Chakravartty, Paula, and Srirupa Roy. 2015. "Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections." *Television & New Media* 16(4):311–322.
- Geertz, Clifford. 2008. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Cultural Geography Reader*, edited by T. Oakes and P. Price. London: Routledge.
- Gudavarthy, Ajay. 2023. *Politics, Ethics and Emotions in 'New India'*. London: Routledge India.
- Hasan, Zoya. 2024. *Democracy on Trial: Majoritarianism and Dissent in India*. Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2021. *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul F., and Bernard Berelson. 1965. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
- Moffitt, Benjamin. 2017. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Paley, Julia. 2002. "Toward an Anthropology of Democracy." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:469–496.
- Schaffer, Frederic C. 2014. *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018. "Unwelcome Change: Understanding, Evaluating, and Extending Theories of Democratic Backsliding." *Democratization* 25(8):1326–1346.