



RESEARCH PAPER

Electoral Arithmetic, Identity Politics, and Muslim Political Representation under India's First-Past-the-Post System

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ABSTRACT

Indian Muslims continue to experience persistent political marginalization despite sustained electoral participation. Unlike other historically disadvantaged groups; SCs, STs, and OBCs, Muslims were excluded from political reservation, while the First-Past-the-Post system further constrains minority representation in the absence of proportional representation. The historical burden of Partition in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh continues to shape Muslim political vulnerability within India's majoritarian framework. Empirically, Muslim representation in Parliament has remained awfully low, with the exceptional Seventh General Election of 1980 around 49 MPs. This paper argues that the recent turn towards Muslim identity-based parties under FPTP fragments opposition votes, unintentionally strengthening BJP (NDA). Drawing on constituency-level patterns of Muslim concentration and ghettoization, the paper proposes that strategic political integration within non-communal or secular parties offers a more viable route to legislative representation than electoral separatism.

Keywords: Indian Muslims, First-Past-the-Post, Muslim representation, legislative representation, AIMIM, AIUDF

The continued political underrepresentation of Muslims within India's legislatures has created growing disenchantment with mainstream secular parties. Despite continued electoral participation, Muslim presence in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies remains disproportionately low, particularly in the absence of political reservation or proportional representation (Asim, 2026). Under such conditions, segments of Muslim voters have increasingly looked towards identity-based political formations such as the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in Assam (Joshi, Ranjan & Sircar, 2016), the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala as alternative vehicles of political

assertion. This turn reflects not merely ideological preference but a response to structural exclusion and seeming electoral neglect by larger parties.

As electoral system literature demonstrates, the success of political mobilization is deeply shaped by the rules through which votes are converted into seats. In plurality systems such as India's First-Past-the-Post (FPTP), political outcomes are determined by relative majorities rather than absolute vote shares, often producing severe disproportionality

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between votes polled and seats secured (Bindhu Sree 2018).

First Past the Post System and Democracy

This section updates the empirical evidence on vote–seat disproportionality under India’s FPTP system by extending the Congress and BJP datasets up to the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The extended tables further demonstrate systemic volatility for secular parties and the amplification of pluralities for dominant parties, with direct implications for Muslim political representation.

Table 1: Congress Vote Share vs Seat Share under FPTP (1971–2024)

Year	Election Outcome	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won (% of Lok Sabha)
1971	Won	43.7	352 (64.8)
1977	Lost	34.5	154 (28.4)
1980	Won	42.7	353 (65.0)
1984	Won	48.1	405 (74.6)
1989	Lost	39.5	197 (36.3)
1991	Won	36.5	232 (42.7)
1996	Lost	28.8	140 (25.8)
1998	Lost	25.8	141 (26.0)
1999	Lost	28.3	114 (21.0)
2004	Won	26.7	145 (26.7)
2009	Won	28.55	206 (37.94)
2014	Lost	19.52	44 (8.10)
2019	Lost	19.49	52 (9.6)
2024	Lost	21.19	99 (18.2)

Source: (Dierks, 2026).

The extended Congress data confirms chronic electoral volatility under FPTP. Even when the party secured over 21% of the national vote in 2024, its seat share remained under 20%. This reinforces the argument that under multi-cornered contests, dispersed vote banks, particularly minority votes, translate poorly into seats. The share of vote do not reflect in the seat won.

Table 2: BJP Vote Share Vs Seat Share Under FPTP (1984–2024)

Year	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won (% of Lok Sabha)
1984	7.7	2 (0.4)
1989	11.5	86 (15.8)
1991	20.0	121 (22.3)
1996	20.3	161 (29.7)
1998	25.6	182 (33.5)
1999	23.6	182 (33.5)
2004	22.2	138 (25.4)
2009	18.8	116 (21.2)
2014	31.34	282 (51.93)
2019	37.36	303 (55.8)
2024	36.50	240 (44.1)

Source: (Dierks, 2026).

The BJP’s electoral trajectory illustrates the amplification logic of FPTP. Vote shares in the mid-30% range were sufficient to secure parliamentary dominance in both 2019 and 2024 (Dierks, 2026), while even a marginal decline in votes did not proportionately reduce its seat share. This asymmetry is central to understanding why identity-based minority parties struggle under the same system. The claim of AIUDF and AIMIM and such that we need seats as per population is not going to materialise where there are no reservation and proportional representation.

Identity Politics under FPTP; Structural Constraints and Electoral Outcomes

The FPTP system systematically disadvantages parties whose support is dispersed across constituencies while privileging those with concentrated vote banks. As Bindhu Sree (2018) argues, FPTP generates extensive vote wastage, underrepresentation of minorities, and artificial majorities, particularly in fragmented societies. In this context, Muslim identity-based parties can succeed only in a limited number of extremely ghettoised constituencies where demographic concentration is exceptionally high (Hussain, 2026).

Outside such enclaves, the entry of identity parties fragments the opposition vote, reducing the likelihood of Muslim candidates being elected from non-communal or secular parties. Rather than increasing overall Muslim representation, this fragmentation inadvertently strengthens parties with consolidated majoritarian support. In the absence of alternative voting mechanisms, such as preferential voting, or institutional safeguards like political reservation, identity-based mobilization under FPTP thus leads to electoral isolation rather than empowerment. Consequently, while Muslim identity parties may deliver symbolic representation and localized gains, they remain structurally incapable of reversing systemic underrepresentation within India's existing electoral framework.

First-Past-the-Post and the Political Disadvantage of Minorities

India's First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system, inherited from the colonial period, has long been criticised for its disproportional translation of votes into seats, often disadvantaging geographically dispersed minorities (Bindhu Sree, 2018). In the absence of proportional representation or constitutionally mandated political reservation for Muslims, their legislative presence has remained contingent on the candidate strategies of mainstream parties rather than institutional guarantees. This structural limitation becomes especially significant in a fragmented, multi-party polity where marginal shifts in vote shares can lead to substantial losses in representation.

Within this context, the emergence and expansion of explicitly Muslim identity-based parties require careful scrutiny. While such formations articulate legitimate grievances of underrepresentation and exclusion, their participation under FPTP can inadvertently intensify vote fragmentation in closely contested constituencies. Empirical patterns from recent state elections suggest that this dynamic has, in several instances, contributed to a decline in Muslim legislative strength rather than its consolidation. Bihar offers a pertinent illustration: the number of Muslim MLAs declined from around

25 to nearly 11 over the last three assembly elections, with the entry of new Muslim-focused parties often coinciding with multi-cornered contests and divided minority votes (Parthasarathy, 2025). A similar contraction is visible in Uttar Pradesh, where Muslim representation in the Assembly fell from about 68 during the 2012–2017 Samajwadi Party government to nearly 38 in subsequent elections, raising concerns about further erosion in forthcoming contests (Mishra, 2025).

Comparative experience indicates that Muslims tend to secure relatively stable representation within broad-based secular parties, where their candidacies are embedded in wider social coalitions and protected by cross-community vote transfers (Farooqui, 2020).

By contrast, identity-centric parties operating under FPTP face severe arithmetic constraints, limiting their capacity to convert vote share into seats and, in some cases, indirectly benefiting majoritarian formations (Sridharan 2002). Scholarly commentary on recent experiments with Muslim political assertion cautions that while such moves reflect democratic agency, they also risk deepening political marginalization in the absence of electoral system reform or alliance-based strategies.

The interaction between FPTP, non-reservation, and identity politics remains central to understanding the paradox of Muslim political assertion and declining legislative representation in contemporary India.

Critical Limits of FPTP and the Role of AIMIM–AIUDF in Muslim Political Marginalisation

Under the First Past the Post (FPTP) electoral system, political outcomes reward concentration of votes rather than breadth of support. For numerically dispersed minorities such as Muslims, this system structurally limits representation. In this context, the electoral strategies of All India Majlise-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) and All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) have further deepened Muslim political marginalisation rather than mitigating it.

These parties largely operate by contesting elections in Muslim-concentrated constituencies and by drawing Muslim votes away from secular, non-communal parties. Under FPTP, such vote fragmentation directly benefits majoritarian forces, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose ideological ecosystem includes the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Even when AIMIM or AIUDF do not win, their presence often ensures the defeat of secular candidates who might otherwise have been electorally viable with consolidated minority and liberal votes.

AIMIM and AIUDF offer little by way of a concrete alternative political programme beyond rhetorical critique. Their politics is marked by sharp denunciations of secular parties for “abandoning” Muslims, alongside carefully calibrated and limited criticism of the BJP–RSS combine. This asymmetry allows them to posture as defenders of Muslim interests without fundamentally challenging the structures of majoritarian dominance. In effect, they function as convenient political actors within an already communalised electoral field.

Without Proportional Representation, minority-specific parties under FPTP are not instruments of empowerment but mechanisms of containment (Scroll.in, 2024). They contribute to the ghettoisation of Muslim politics into a small number of “safe” seats, while reducing Muslim representation across

legislatures as a whole, representation that is already severely skewed relative to population share.

From a strategic perspective, the more viable path lies in diversification rather than convergence; Muslims contesting elections across a range of secular parties (Scroll.in, 2024), embedding themselves within broader political coalitions, and sustaining influence in legislative, executive, and judicial domains. Convergence towards AIMIM, AIUDF, or similar religiously defined formations serves the long-term interests of majoritarian politics, which seeks to sever Muslim linkages with secular parties and confine them to narrowly defined electoral ghettos.

Muslims risk being reduced to a form of political capital, mobilized during elections but structurally excluded from power, if held hostage to parties that thrive on permanent opposition and symbolic politics. Under FPTP, AIMIM and AIUDF thus operate less as vehicles of representation and more as fertilisers of communal polarisation, inadvertently reinforcing the very system that sustains Muslim political vulnerability.

This analysis underscores that, in the absence of proportional representation, minority empowerment depends less on exclusive identity parties and more on strategic engagement within secular political formations (Table 3).

Table 3: Thematic Summary Table: FPTP, Community Parties, and Muslim Representation

Dimension	Secular Parties under FPTP	AIMIM / AIUDF under FPTP	Net Impact on Muslim Representation
Vote aggregation	Broad coalitions across communities	Narrow, community-specific vote base	Fragmentation of minority votes
Electoral viability	Higher chances in mixed constituencies	Limited to Muslim-concentrated seats	Reduced overall seat wins
Political leverage	Access to government, policy influence	Mostly oppositional, symbolic presence	Weak bargaining power
Impact on majoritarian parties	Can resist polarisation if united	Indirectly benefits BJP via vote split	Strengthens majoritarian dominance
Long-term outcome	Possibility of gradual inclusion	Ghettoisation of Muslim politics	Decline in legislative representation

DISCUSSION

This study points to a persistent structural deficit in Muslim legislative representation within India's First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system. Despite continuous electoral participation, Muslims remain significantly under-represented in Parliament. Unlike Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Muslims were excluded from political reservation at the founding of the Republic, and in the absence of proportional representation, electoral outcomes have remained contingent on plurality arithmetic rather than vote share (Sridharan, 2002).

A longitudinal analysis of Lok Sabha elections since 1952 demonstrates that Muslim representation has remained consistently below population share, with only two partial deviations, 1980 and 1984. These exceptions coincided with periods of Congress dominance and were products of favorable ticket distribution rather than Muslim political consolidation. Their shortlived nature confirms that they did not alter the underlying structural constraints of representation (Beg, 2024).

Table 4 illustrates that, barring these two elections, Muslim representation has largely fluctuated between 4 and 6 %, even as the Muslim population rose steadily from around 10 percent in 1951 to nearly 14 percent in recent decades. The post-2014 period reflects a renewed contraction, underscoring the intensified effects of majoritarian consolidation (Jaffrelot, 2019).

Within this structural context, the emergence of Muslim identity-based parties such as AIMIM and AIUDF must be evaluated through the lens of electoral arithmetic rather than symbolic assertion. Under FPTP, electoral success depends on achieving constituency-level plurality, not vote aggregation across dispersed populations. Given the spatial dispersion of Muslims and the effects of delimitation that have diluted Muslim-majority constituencies, identity-based consolidation often fragments opposition votes rather than converting demographic strength into legislative seats (Beg, 2015; Roy & Sopariwala, 2019).

As shown in Table 5, the entry of Muslim identity parties into competitive constituencies frequently

produces multi-cornered contests that advantage the BJP and its allies.

This dynamic unintentionally reinforces majoritarian dominance, while simultaneously weakening secular candidates who might otherwise have secured victory (Khalidi, 1993; Farooqui, 2020).

The assertive rhetoric of identity-based mobilization may deepen political polarisation, making mainstream opposition parties increasingly reluctant to nominate Muslim candidates due to the fear of being labelled as engaging in "minority appeasement". This further erodes Muslim "winnability" across party lines, compounding marginalization rather than alleviating it.

Under the prevailing institutional framework, strategic political integration within broad-based, non-communal parties offers a more viable route to representation than electoral separatism. This does not imply the abandonment of minority concerns, but rather a pragmatic engagement with electoral realities. In the absence of proportional representation, coalition-building and diversified party affiliation remain essential for improving Muslim legislative presence.

The crisis of Muslim representation is not a failure of participation or political consciousness, but a consequence of systemic design. Without structural reform of the electoral system, symbolic assertion alone cannot correct substantive democratic exclusion.

Causes of Muslim Under-representation in Electoral Politics

Scholars have examined the reasons behind the declining political representation of Muslims in India. One major explanation relates to the upsurge of majoritarian politics. Jaffrelot (2019) links the decline in Muslim representation to the growing influence of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. Whenever the Bharatiya Janata Party gains power in a new state, the number of Muslim legislators tends to decline. He illustrates this with the example of Uttar Pradesh, where Muslim representation in the state assembly dropped to about 6% in 2017, compared to around 17% in 2012. The higher

Table 4: Muslim Representation in the Lok Sabha (1952–2024)

Election Year	Muslim MPs	% of Lok Sabha	Contextual Note
1952–1977 (avg.)	25–32	4.6–5.9%	Persistent underrepresentation
1980	49	9.04%	Exceptional Congress sweep
1984	45	8.30%	Post-Indira sympathy wave
2004	35	6.45%	Declining trend resumes
2014	23	4.24%	BJP dominance
2019	26	4.79%	Marginal increase
2024	24	4.42%	Continued stagnation

Source: Election Commission of India; compiled from Beg (2024).

Table 5: Electoral Consequences of Muslim Identity-Based Consolidation under FPTP

Strategy	Immediate Electoral Effect	Structural Outcome
Fielding Muslim identityparty candidates in mixed constituencies	Division of opposition votes	Increased probability of BJP/NDA victory
Rhetorical assertion centered on religious identity	Heightened polarisation	Reduced cross-community coalition-building
Concentration in limited Muslim-majority pockets	Localised visibility	National marginality
Opposition fragmentation	Weakening of secular candidates	Consolidation of majoritarian dominance

representation in 2012 was largely due to the electoral success of the Samajwadi Party (SP), which had fielded a significant number of Muslim candidates. The overwhelming victory of the BJP in 2017 reduced the presence of Muslim MLAs in the assembly (Jaffrelot 2019).

One more explanation focuses on institutional factors within the electoral system. Sridharan (2002) argues that the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system structurally disadvantages minority groups. The system tends to favour majority communities whose votes are geographically concentrated. Muslims in India are generally more evenly dispersed across constituencies rather than concentrated in specific regions. They often secure fewer seats even when their vote share is significant (Roy 2019). This structural feature of the electoral system limits the possibility of proportional representation for minority communities.

Political strategies of parties also influence Muslim representation. Omar Khalidi (1993) observes that anti-Muslim sentiments mobilized by certain political actors have made opposition parties

cautious about fielding Muslim candidates. Parties such as the Congress and other regional groups often fear that nominating Muslim candidates could lead to polarization and allow the BJP to consolidate the votes of the majority community, still continues and with all these cautions they are clubbed and appeasers to minorities. Political parties tend to nominate Muslim candidates only in constituencies where the Muslim population is relatively large.

Reserved Seats Conundrum

Even within such constituencies, structural constraints further limit representation. Many seats with sizeable Muslim populations have been reserved for Scheduled Castes, reducing the number of constituencies where Muslim candidates have a realistic chance of contesting. In Uttar Pradesh several constituencies with substantial Muslim populations have been reserved for Scheduled Castes. Six constituencies with more than 30% Muslim population, four with more than 25%, and seven with more than 20% Muslims have been reserved, so limiting Muslim electoral opportunities.

Delimitation

Electoral delimitation has also played a role in reshaping constituency demographics. The redrawing of constituency boundaries has often reduced the concentration of Muslim voters in certain areas.

Beg (2015) highlights that the Bareilly Cantonment assembly constituency once had about 57% Muslim voters. After the implementation of the recommendations of the Fourth Delimitation Commission in 2008, the Muslim population in that constituency declined to around 35%.

In the Rampur (U.P.) assembly constituency, the proportion of Muslim voters fell by more than 20% after delimitation. In Barhapur constituency of Bijnor, the Muslim population decreased from about 45% to less than 30% after the redrawing of boundaries (Beg 2015). Such changes weaken the ability of Muslim voters to influence electoral outcomes.

Scholars also debated the broader consequences of this under-representation. Iqbal Ansari (2006) argues that the lack of political representation has contributed to the social, economic, and educational backwardness experienced by many Muslims. Adnan Farooqui emphasizes that adequate political representation is morally important and democratically necessary for minority communities.

Bhogale also points out that Muslim women remain extremely under-represented. Since Independence, only 25 Muslim women have been elected to the Lok Sabha out of 690 women MPs, meaning that Muslim women constitute less than 1% of the members of the lower house.

These findings suggest that when representation is low, issues affecting a particular community may not be sufficiently articulated in legislative forums.

Political party dynamics also shape how representatives act within legislative institutions. In many cases, Muslim representatives elected on the tickets of large political parties have limited autonomy in raising issues related to their community. Parties often adopt a cautious stance on matters concerning Muslims in order to avoid

political backlash. As a result, even when the number of Muslim legislators appears relatively high, their ability to influence political discourse may remain restricted.

A frequently cited example is the situation in Uttar Pradesh during the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013. At that time the state assembly had 69 Muslim MLAs, the highest number since Independence. Of these, 45 belonged to the ruling Samajwadi Party. Many of them were unable to strongly raise the concerns of Muslims affected by the violence because the party leadership preferred to avoid actions that could further polarize the electorate.

Leaders from smaller or independent political formations sometimes raise community-specific issues more openly. Leaders such as Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) often articulate issues concerning Muslims more directly in public discourse. Such appeals do not always translate into electoral success outside specific regional strongholds like Hyderabad. Ahmed (2019) notes that the dynamics of electoral politics vary widely across constituencies, shaped by local social and economic conditions. Surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (Lokniti-CSDS, NES 2019 and 2024) show that Muslim voters, like other citizens, do not vote solely along religious lines but are influenced by broader concerns such as livelihood, development, and governance.

The issue of Muslim political representation cannot be reduced simply to identity politics or electoral numbers. The concerns of Muslims are not limited to a single community but are part of broader national issues. Yet in a deeply polarized political environment, many political parties hesitate to openly discuss Muslim representation. Offering representation that reflects the community's share in the population is often viewed as politically risky.

Available evidence indicates that Muslims remain significantly under-represented in legislative bodies. The reasons include institutional features of the electoral system, political strategies of parties, demographic distribution, constituency delimitation, and broader patterns of identity politics.

CONCLUSION

For many, it may appear counterintuitive, and even undemocratic to suggest that Muslims should refrain from voting for religion-based political parties out of concern that their legislative representation will, in fact, decline. This outcome is a direct and predictable consequence of India's First-Past-the-Post electoral system. Minority communities necessarily operate within structural constraints, and electoral strategy must be guided by institutional realities rather than normative preference alone. Criticism of secular parties for failing to safeguard a proportionate share of Muslim legislators must also be viewed within the broader framework of Indian political society, where religious polarisation coexists with electoral competition. Secular parties remain reluctant to pursue political reservation for Muslims, not just due to ideological hesitation but owing to the genuine risk of majoritarian backlash. A Muslim population share of 14–15% has not rendered into a corresponding presence in legislatures. The popular claim that Muslims function as a decisive “vote bank” is academically weak and holds true only in a limited number of constituencies.

Such constituencies are confined to specific regions, parts of Kashmir, a few parliamentary seats in Assam and West Bengal, one or two seats in Kerala, and similarly marginal pockets elsewhere (including Simanchal, Bihar, western UP and few others). Electoral evidence further suggests that any substantial shift of Muslim voters in states such as Uttar Pradesh towards communal or identity-based parties in forthcoming assembly elections is likely to reduce, rather than increase, the number of Muslim MLAs, as previously observed in Bihar. While parties such as AIMIM and AIUDF may genuinely seek to enhance Muslim representation, their participation under FPTP inadvertently harms Muslim legislators elected through secular parties. Greater representation has historically been achieved through diversification across secular political formations, as seen in earlier phases in Assam.

GENERATIVE AI DECLARATION

The author(s) confirm that there was no use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for assisting in the writing or editing of the manuscript, and no images were manipulated using AI. The authors developed and verified all scientific content, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work presented, and no AI tool was listed as an author.

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