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# The Psychological Oxygen Model of Political Engagement: Emotional Foundations of Indian Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

Democratic participation in India reflects a unique synthesis of rational ideals and emotional attachment. While constitutional principles emphasize equality and sovereignty, the vitality of political engagement often depends on collective emotions and identity-based affiliations. This paper introduces the Psychological Oxygen Model of Political Engagement, a theoretical framework explaining how emotional and cognitive mechanisms sustain democratic participation even in ideological contradictions. The model conceptualizes political engagement as a cyclical process driven by identity activation, emotional arousal, cognitive rationalization, and systemic reinforcement. It argues that emotional energy functions as the sustaining “oxygen” that maintains the life of democracy, transforming contradictions between secular ideals and identity politics into psychological equilibrium. By situating emotion at the centre of political behaviour, the study contributes to understanding how democratic systems endure through affective renewal rather than solely rational deliberation. The model offers a culturally grounded explanation for the persistence of emotional politics in India and emphasizes the need for psychological literacy in democratic discourse.

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## Introduction

Democracy, in its ideal form, rests on the rational deliberation of citizens who make informed decisions grounded in principles of equality, justice and sovereignty. Yet, in practice the democratic participation



often extends beyond the rational domain and draws its strength from emotional and psychological undercurrents. In the Indian context the political life is sustained by an intricate balance between constitutional ideals and emotionally charged collective identities. This paradox about the coexistence of secular sovereignty and identity-based mobilization constitutes the central psychological dynamic of India's political behaviour. Rather than representing a flaw in the system, this duality appears to serve as its sustaining force. This is what that might be termed as "*psychological oxygen*" that keeps democratic engagement alive.

Modern political psychology views political participation not merely as a function of rational choice, but as an outcome of cognitive, emotional and identity-driven processes (Huddy, Sears, & Levy, 2013; Marcus, 2000). Voters respond to messages that resonate with their sense of belonging and shared meaning, often prioritizing affective attachment over empirical reasoning. Emotional responses to symbols, narratives and collective histories shape political orientation and participation to a degree that outweighs purely instrumental calculations. This has led to a growing recognition that democratic behaviour cannot be understood solely through institutional or policy frameworks and it requires an understanding of the psychological motives that underlie group cohesion and loyalty (Westen, 2007; Druckman & Lupia, 2017).

In India, the emotional texture of political life has historically linked with collective identities rooted in religion, caste and region. These categories though social in nature, serve deep psychological purposes by offering individuals a stable sense of identity within a complex and changing environment. The persistence of identity-driven politics reflects the enduring power of symbolic and affective dimensions in shaping electoral decisions. Emotional appeals to heritage, belonging or cultural continuity supply the motivational energy necessary to sustain participation within the vast and diverse electorate. Consequently, the maintenance of democratic vitality depends as much on emotional engagement as on rational deliberation (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Yadav, 2019).

The coexistence of secular constitutional values and identity-based mobilization creates what can be described as a psychologically functional contradiction. While the democratic framework emphasizes equality and individual autonomy, the collective identity provides emotional security and social meaning. Citizens are thus situated between two psychological imperatives: the need for rational self-determination and the desire for emotional belonging. This tension fuels engagement, producing a system that is both ideologically conflicted and psychologically cohesive. It ensures continuity through the emotional reactivation of group loyalties, which periodically re-energize democratic participation. This dynamic



reveals how emotion operates as the unseen substrate that oxygenates political life, transforming contradictions into mechanisms of stability rather than decay.

From a psychological standpoint, the functioning of Indian democracy can be seen as a continuous process of emotional replacement. Periodic social and political stimuli's such as ideological campaigns, symbolic events or moments of collective anxiety can reactivate the underlying affective currents that sustain engagement. These waves of emotional activation prevent apathy and restore vitality to the system. The resulting structure is not a static contradiction but a living, adaptive equilibrium in which emotional currents complement rational ideals. Understanding this process demands a framework that situates emotion, cognition and identity within a unified psychological model of political engagement.

This paper proposes such a framework through the Psychological Oxygen Model of Political Engagement. The model conceptualizes political participation as a cyclical process driven by four interconnected psychological mechanisms like identity activation, emotional arousal, cognitive rationalization and system reinforcement. Together, these processes sustain the vitality of democratic systems even in the presence of ideological contradictions. The model highlights that emotional energy functions as the sustaining element of political life, which is an invisible but essential force comparable to oxygen and without which democratic structures would lose their vitality.

The proposed model contributes to the field of political psychology by offering a culturally grounded and theoretically integrative explanation for the persistence of emotional politics in India. It moves beyond traditional rational-choice frameworks to highlight how collective emotion and psychological needs for coherence and belonging maintain political engagement. This approach not only improves the understanding of Indian political behaviour but also extends the conceptual boundaries of political psychology by illustrating how affect and identity operate as stabilizing forces within democratic contradictions.

### **Theoretical Background**

The paradox between the formal principles of sovereignty, secularism and equality on the one hand and the persistent use of religion, caste and identity as tools of political mobilization on the other hand can be illustrated through several established political-psychological frameworks. These frameworks provide insights into why citizens may simultaneously endorse constitutional ideals while supporting identity-based politics and why political actors continue to exploit these dynamics to maintain engagement and loyalty. The following sections detail five theoretical lenses that explain this phenomenon.



### 1) Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept and esteem from the social groups to which they belong. Groups may be defined by caste, religion, ethnicity or region, and these identities are psychologically salient when individuals perceive intergroup differences or threats to their group's status. SIT explains why Indian voters often prioritize group loyalty over abstract principles of democracy or secularism: voter behaviour is guided not merely by policy evaluation but by perceived threats to or validation of their social identity.

In the Indian context, caste functions as a critical axis of political identity. Voters often belong to a caste (sub-caste) or broader varna category provides a sense of belonging and act as a framework for interpreting social hierarchies. Empirical research shows that caste identity predicts voting patterns more strongly than ideological alignment or economic policy considerations in many regions of India (Suryanarayan & Huber, 2016). Similarly, religious identity acts as a marker of in-group belonging. Political movements that emphasize Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian identity activate this social-psychological mechanism, strengthening cohesion within the in-group and shaping intergroup political competition (Pew Research Centre, 2022). The concept of “psychological oxygen” aligns with SIT and the identity-based appeals provide the emotional fuel that keeps group solidarity alive. Rituals, festivals, symbols and narratives associated with caste or religion are not merely cultural expressions but also serves as emotional reinforcements that sustain political engagement. In elections, leaders often invoke the threat of out-groups (“us versus them” framing) to heighten the salience of in-group loyalty, which increases the likelihood of voting along identity lines (Varshney, 2002). Therefore SIT clarifies why identity-driven political mobilization persists even when it seemingly contradicts the formal values of secular democracy.

### 2) Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957)

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) addresses how individuals manage the psychological discomfort that arises from holding conflicting beliefs or engaging in contradictory behaviours. In the Indian political landscape, citizens often face dissonance when their support for secular and democratic principles conflicts with voting for parties that emphasize caste or religious identity. According to Festinger (1957), individuals reduce this dissonance through justification, rationalization or through selective perception by effectively aligning their attitudes and behaviour to minimize psychological discomfort.



If a voter simultaneously endorse the principle of secularism while voting for a party that advances Hindu nationalist rhetoric. To resolve the dissonance, the voter might rationalize the choice as necessary to protect their religious or cultural community, framing the decision as morally defensible despite apparent contradictions existing. Similarly, voters may interpret constitutional ideals flexibly, such that secularism becomes compatible with religious loyalty when the latter is framed as culturally integral to national identity (Saleem, 2021). In this context, identity-based political appeals function as cognitive anchors. By framing group-specific threats or opportunities, these political actors provide voters with psychologically acceptable justifications, reducing their dissonance while sustaining engagement. This process reinforces the cycle in which rational principles coexist with identity-driven behaviour, and explains why citizens often tolerate contradictions between abstract democratic ideals and concrete political choices.

### 3) Symbolic Politics Theory

Symbolic Politics Theory emphasizes that political behaviour is frequently driven by emotional responses to symbols, narratives and collective representations, rather than by rational policy considerations (Sears, 1993). Symbols such as temples, religious icons, caste insignia, flags or commemorative rituals act as emotional triggers, evoking loyalty, pride or fear. This in turn shape voting patterns and political behaviour. The theory highlights the potency of symbolic appeals in mobilizing affective engagement and sustaining collective identity.

In India, symbolic politics is evident across multiple scales. For instance, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and associated debates over temple construction mobilized Hindu identity through emotionally resonant symbols, including sacred spaces, imagery of deities and ritualized narratives. Similarly, caste-based political mobilization often employs historical figures, local heroes or community emblems to reinforce collective consciousness. Even regional identities are sustained through linguistic symbols, state flags, and cultural festivals (Varshney, 2002; Saleem, 2021).

The psychological impact of symbolic politics can be conceptualized as a supply of emotional oxygen. While abstract rational arguments regarding governance, policy efficiency, or secularism may not sustain engagement alone, symbols provide continuous emotional reinforcement, ensuring loyalty, participation and the internalization of identity-based priorities. Symbolic cues are particularly effective because they bypass deliberate cognitive processing, directly influencing affective and heuristic decision-making pathways.



#### **4) System Justification Theory**

System Justification Theory (SJT) proposes that individuals have a psychological motivation to perceive social, political, and economic systems as legitimate and fair, even when they contain inequalities or contradictions (Jost & Banaji, 1994). In the Indian political context, this theory explains how voters rationalize the coexistence of identity-based mobilization and constitutional principles, maintaining cognitive and emotional equilibrium while participating in seemingly contradictory political behaviours. For instance, citizens may accept caste- or religion-based preferential policies or political appeals as compatible with national pride or cultural preservation. The ideology of Hindutva, which frames religious nationalism as a continuation of cultural heritage, can be psychologically normalized even among voters who endorse democratic ideals of equality and secularism. Similarly, voters may justify caste-based affirmative action or vote-bank politics as mechanisms that sustain social order, fairness or representation, aligning system justification motives with identity-based engagement (Jost et al., 2004). SJT suggests that these rationalizations are not merely post hoc cognitive adjustments but are structurally embedded in the political system. By integrating identity-based mobilization into the broader narrative of national stability, the political actors can maintain voter support while reinforcing the legitimacy of a system that formally upholds equality and secularism.

#### **5) Dual-Process Model**

The Dual-Process Model in political psychology posits that decision-making is mediated through two interrelated cognitive systems: a rational-analytic system and an emotional-affective system (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). The rational system evaluates policy, governance, and institutional frameworks, while the emotional system responds to affective cues such as fear, pride, or group belonging. Indian political behaviour demonstrates the interaction of these systems, with rational principles such as democracy, secularism, and constitutional sovereignty coexisting alongside affective engagement through religion, caste, and regional identity.

For example, voters may rationally endorse a secular constitution while simultaneously responding emotionally to political campaigns emphasizing religious identity. Political actors exploit this duality by providing rational justifications for actions that primarily engage the emotional system. Campaign messages may frame identity-based appeals in terms of cultural preservation, historical justice, or national security, thereby engaging both cognitive pathways. This interaction ensures that voters remain loyal and participatory, sustaining engagement in political processes that may involve inherent contradictions.



The dual-process perspective complements the concepts of social identity, cognitive dissonance, symbolic politics, and system justification. While the former theories explain *why* identity and emotional appeals are compelling, the dual-process model explains *how* rational and emotional processing co-occur in voter decision-making, creating a stable psychological environment in which contradictory political behaviours are maintained and normalized.

### **Psychological Oxygen Model of Political Engagement**

The proposed Psychological Oxygen Model of Political Engagement conceptualizes how identity, emotion, cognition and systemic factors interact to sustain political participation and loyalty, even when political behaviour appears to contradict formal constitutional ideals. This model presents a stepwise mechanism that explains why voters in India continue to engage with religion and caste based politics, despite the constitutional emphasis on secularism and equality. The metaphor of “psychological oxygen” is used to describe the emotional and cognitive energy that fuels this engagement and is similar to how oxygen sustains physical life.

The model is structured around four stages: Identity Activation, Emotional Arousal, Cognitive Rationalization and System Reinforcement. Each stage represents psychological process that transforms abstract identity markers into sustained political action.

#### **Stage 1: Identity Activation**

The first stage, Identity Activation, occurs when individuals perceive political stimuli that highlight social group membership. Social identities like religion, caste or regional affiliation become salient when political actors explicitly or implicitly invoke these categories. According to Social Identity Theory, people derive part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When group identity is activated, individuals are motivated to maintain the status and welfare of the in-group while differentiating themselves from out-groups. Identity activation is frequently initiated through campaign rhetoric, media framing, and symbolic events. For example, political parties may emphasize caste-based grievances, historical injustices or religious festivals as a means of drawing attention to specific group identities. Once activated, these identities generate a psychological pull that directs voter attention and concern toward in-group interests rather than purely policy or ideological considerations (Varshney, 2002; Suryanarayan & Huber, 2016). Identity activation functions as the first step in providing psychological oxygen, creating a sense of belonging and purpose that energizes individuals to engage with political processes. Without this activation, emotional and cognitive engagement with



politics would be weaker, and rational principles like secularism or constitutional equality might dominate decision-making.

### **Stage 2: Emotional Arousal**

Once identity is activated, the next stage is Emotional Arousal. This stage engages the affective system of political cognition. Emotional responses like pride, fear, belonging or resentment are triggered by group-relevant stimuli (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Emotional arousal amplifies attention to identity-based political messages, increasing the salience of the in-group and reinforcing behaviour tendencies that favour group preservation and promotion.

In India, political campaigns frequently employ strategies that induce emotional arousal. For instance, religious symbolism, narratives of historical persecution or portrayals of caste-based discrimination evoke affective responses that deepen commitment to political actors or policies aligned with one's identity. The use of communal rhetoric, references to religious rituals or highlighting regional achievements are potent tools to induce pride and belonging, while emphasizing threats from out-groups may trigger fear and vigilance (Saleem, 2021; Pew Research Centre, 2022). Emotional arousal has significant political consequences. It enhances voter engagement, increases political participation, and strengthens loyalty to parties perceived as defenders of the in-group. These responses are not purely rational; they are rooted in the affective system of the brain, which often overrides logical deliberation in situations of perceived threat or opportunity. Thus, emotional arousal serves as the second component of "psychological oxygen," supplying the energy needed for active political participation.

### **Stage 3: Cognitive Rationalization**

The third stage, Cognitive Rationalization addresses the psychological process of reconciling conflicting beliefs or behaviours. Citizens often experience cognitive dissonance when their engagement in identity-based politics seems to contradict abstract democratic ideals, such as secularism, equality or rational governance (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive rationalization allows individuals to reduce this discomfort by generating justifications that render behaviour psychologically acceptable.

For example, a voter may rationalize support for a religiously aligned party by framing it as a means to protect cultural heritage or community welfare. Similarly, caste-based voting may be justified as ensuring representation and social justice, even when it appears to conflict with universal egalitarian principles. Rationalization mechanisms can also involve selective attention to information, reinterpretation of constitutional principles, or invocation of historical context to reconcile perceived contradictions (Jost &



Banaji, 1994). This stage is critical because it transforms raw emotional energy into morally acceptable political action. Cognitive rationalization integrates emotional arousal with ethical and ideological considerations, allowing voters to maintain a coherent self-concept while engaging in politically expedient behaviour. It represents the bridge between affective engagement and sustainable political participation, ensuring that emotional responses do not destabilize individual beliefs or social cohesion.

#### **Stage 4: System Reinforcement**

System Reinforcement involves the stabilization and normalization of identity-based political behaviour within broader social and political structures. System Justification Theory suggests that individuals have a psychological need to perceive political and social systems as legitimate and just, even when they involve inequalities or contradictions (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). By framing identity-based mobilization as compatible with national pride, cultural heritage, or societal stability, political actors reinforce both voter loyalty and the legitimacy of the political system itself. In India, system reinforcement can be observed in multiple forms. Nationalistic rhetoric often frames religious or caste-based mobilization as a contribution to national unity or progress. Similarly, constitutional frameworks such as affirmative action or minority protections are interpreted as mechanisms that align identity-based preferences with democratic principles. Media narratives, political speeches, and educational discourses often emphasize the compatibility of identity mobilization with the continuity of democratic governance (Varshney, 2002). System reinforcement ensures the continuation of contradiction, allowing voters to participate in identity-driven politics while maintaining allegiance to sovereign principles. It consolidates the psychological oxygen generated in earlier stages, converting individual engagement into collective patterns that sustain political stability and party support. Without system reinforcement, emotional and cognitive processes might conflict with institutional structures, potentially undermining both voter loyalty and political legitimacy.

#### **Overview of the Model**

The Psychological Oxygen Model demonstrates a dynamic interaction between identity, emotion, cognition and systemic reinforcement. Each stage draws on political-psychological principles to explain why contradictory behaviours like simultaneous endorsement of secular ideals and caste & religious based voting still persist in India. This model highlights that political engagement is not solely rational but is sustained by the continuous infusion of psychological oxygen, which is generated by identity salience, emotional resonance and cognitive reconciliation. This dynamic explains why Indian democracy remains resilient even during the apparent contradictions between principles and practice. This model



also highlights the interdependence of cognitive and affective systems. While rational considerations provide legitimacy and moral coherence, emotional energy ensures active participation and loyalty. The integration of systemic factors ensures that individual behaviours aggregate into stable patterns that reinforce both party strategies and democratic institutions.

## Discussion

The relationship between ideological sovereignty and emotional dependency in Indian politics creates a paradoxical but remarkably stable democratic system. On the one hand constitutional principles such as secularism, equality and the rule of law provide a rational framework for governance. On the other hand identity-based mobilization through religion, caste and regional affiliations activates deep-seated psychological mechanisms that sustain voter engagement.

Emotional politics becomes self-sustaining because it taps into fundamental human needs for belonging, meaning and social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Voters derive a sense of security and purpose from group membership, which reinforces loyalty to political actors and ideologies that symbolize their identity. Even when voters are aware of inconsistencies between constitutional ideals and identity-driven political practices, cognitive mechanisms such as dissonance reduction and system justification allow them to reconcile these contradictions (Festinger, 1957; Jost & Banaji, 1994). The psychological satisfaction derived from in-group affirmation, recognition and symbolic participation ensures that emotional engagement remains high, independent of policy evaluation or rational deliberation.

The stability of this system depends on periodic re-oxygenation through crises, social disputes or the emergence of salient identity issues. Political actors exploit economic inequalities, religious tensions or caste-based grievances to reactivate emotional engagement by replenishing the psychological oxygen that sustains voter participation. Electoral campaigns often emphasize threats that is real or perceived from out-groups. This invoke historical grievances or celebrate in-group achievements to maintain heightened salience. These recurring activations ensure continuity of the dual process by sustaining the interplay between rational principles and emotional engagement across electoral cycles (Saleem, 2021; Varshney, 2002).

From a broader perspective, the Psychological Oxygen Model illustrates that Indian democracy thrives not merely on rational deliberation or policy evaluation but on a complex interaction between cognitive and affective mechanisms. This duality allows the system to absorb contradictions without destabilization and voters can endorse secular, egalitarian principles while simultaneously supporting identity-based



politics. Emotional appeals provide energy, symbolic resonance and engagement whereas rational and systemic structures provide coherence, legitimacy and moral justification. Recognizing this interplay provides a more understanding of democratic participation and highlights the psychological underpinnings that make identity-driven politics persistent and effective.

## Conclusion

Indian democracy operates at the intersection of rational principles and emotional engagement. The long-term tension between ideological sovereignty and identity-based mobilization is not a flaw but a feature, enabling political stability while accommodating the heterogeneous social landscape of the country. The metaphor of “oxygen of demand” denotes the critical role of emotion in sustaining political life by emotionally engagement functions such as a fuel that energizes voter participation, loyalty and systemic stability.

Understanding the psychological oxygen dynamic has important implications for political education, media responsibility and civic literacy. Recognizing how identity activation, emotional arousal, cognitive rationalization and system reinforcement operate can guide interventions aimed at promoting informed, reflective political participation. Media campaigns, educational programs and civic discourse can be designed to balance emotional engagement with rational deliberation by raising a more psychologically literate electorate capable of navigating the complex relationship of identity and democracy. Indian democracy is sustained not solely through institutional frameworks or rational ideals but through a continuous cycle of emotional and cognitive engagement. Political actors, voters and institutions are all part of a dynamic system in which psychological oxygen ensures participation, loyalty and resilience. By analysing and understanding this mechanism, scholars, policymakers and civic educators can better appreciate the psychological forces that shape political behaviour thus by offering opportunities to enhance democratic processes while mitigating the manipulative potential of identity-based mobilization.

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