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‘Franchise expansion and electoral mobilization: How caste and migration shaped India’s colonial politics’

We study the first limited franchise elections held in colonial Indian provinces in November 1920. Using district-level electoral returns and exploiting differences in the district-level indentured emigration rates to various British colonies in the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries, we argue that the size and ethnic composition of migrants shaped electoral politics in 1920. Our data on the elections comes from the provincial electoral returns, catalogues as "Returns showing the results of Elections in India", which provides detailed, constituency level information on the number of voters, number of votes cast, number of votes polled by the winner, number of votes polled by the first unsuccessful candidate. We use the annual Protector of Immigrants reports to collate district level aggregates of emigration rates between 1860 and 1912, and the original ship registers to gather individual data on emigrants, most importantly the caste of emigrants. We find that higher levels of emigration were associated with higher turnout and more competition in districts with higher caste fragmentation. Migration can affect politics via multiple channels. It can work via the labour market channel by reducing the supply of labour and thereby, increasing the bargaining power of those that remain. Alternatively, it may lead to diffusion of social capital from returning migrants leading to the district becoming more politically active and, thereby, experiencing more competitive elections. To understand how indentured migration shaped electoral politics in colonial India, we use data on the caste and number of returns of the indentured migrants. We find that higher emigration amongst intermediate castes – castes that were politically marginalized under the British compared to upper castes – was associated with higher turnout and more competitive electoral dynamics. Importantly, districts that received a higher share of returnees experienced more competitive elections. This seems to suggest that emigration likely increased knowledge of politics and resources amongst migrant populations, resulting in more competitive political dynamics.