

## THE DYNAMICS OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN INDIA: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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## Introduction

Voting is the simplest form of political participation in a liberal democracies. Voting is a process by which every adult citizen expresses his approval or disapproval of the decisions made by the government, the policies and programmes of different political parties, and the attributes of the candidates who are in the fight to achieve the status of being the representatives of the people [1]. The voting pattern includes the factors that determine how people get to vote and the factors that determine their voting. Samuel S. Eldersveld in his article, Theory a Method in Voting Behaviour Research writes: "The term "voting behaviour" is not new. But it has been used of late to describe certain areas of study and types of political phenomena which previously had either not been conceived or were considered irrelevant." He remarked that voting behaviour connotes today more than examination of voting records, compilation of voting statistics and computation of electoral shifts (Eldersveld, 1972:267). Voting behaviour implies the psychological activity of the voters like perception, emotion and motivation and associates it to political wisdom. It is a complex act and the voters tend to vote based on a friend recommendation about the candidate or party or their sentiments on a given matter or issues (Sikri, 1989:108).

Gordon Marshall: "The study of voting behaviour invariably focuses on the determinants of why people tend to vote in public elections as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they make." Stephen L. Wasby remarks "Voting behaviour is the study of how a person's psychological traits (their beliefs, feelings and motivations) and institutional frameworks (such as how people are communicated with, election rules and structures) together influence how and why people vote [2]." N.G.S. Kini describes voting behaviour as the varying functions of voting in democracy. It helps to strengthen democracy by showing that government power comes from the people's consent and ensures their participation in politics. Simultaneously, it is a vote-making process during which the voters select between the candidates, parties or policies. At the same time, it reflects a person's political orientation (their beliefs and preferences) and serves as a link between individuals and the political system, connecting citizens directly to government institutions and their functioning [3]. Voting behaviour is a study of the voters thinking process, the way they make choices and vote as an individual or as a group. It examines the factors that make people vote in a particular manner, including their social background, political awareness, family and friends influence or issues, which are important to them [4]. The patterns can enable us to understand the role that the citizens are playing in the election process and the way they can impact the outcome of the elections.

## Determinants of Voting Behaviour

Voting behaviour is a complicated and multifaceted subject. No single element can be used to predict the voting behaviour of the electorate, hence several factors must be considered in order to analyse the outcomes. Election survey research studies carried out by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion (IIPO) from 1957 to 1980s revealed that socioeconomic status, caste, religion, leadership, education, political issues, and occupational background were factors in influencing the voting behaviour of Indian voters [5]. The empirical study of the determinant of voting behaviour in India shows that the behaviour of man is determined by various irrational considerations such as caste, religion, language, money, charisma, education, party loyalty, populist slogans, ideological commitment, current and local issues, election campaigns, personal contacts and regionalism [6]. Voting behaviour can be broadly categorised into long term and short term factors. The long term factors are social class, gender, race, culture, religion, age, education and political orientation. Short-term effect involves the work of the ruling party, principal issues, campaign, the image of the party leaders, the impact of the mass media and significant events [7].

**Socio-economic variables:** The determinants of voting are often explained through socio-economic and demographic factors such as age, gender, occupation, income, education, marital status, and place of residence. These have an impact on the magnitude of political participation by citizens since those that have enough resources, education or well-paying jobs tend to be better placed to take part in politics. Overall, the idea is that political engagement requires resources, and those who are better positioned socially and economically can participate more actively [8]. The voting trends indicate that men vote more than women, learned individuals vote more than the illiterate, urban voters vote more than the rural, and middle aged are more likely to vote as compared to the young and old [9]. In most cases, people with higher education and better socioeconomic status usually have greater access to politics compared to those with lower status. Similarly, dominant ethnic and religious groups, political families, long-term residents, and urban dwellers have a better chance of prospering on the political platform [10]. Women's participation in electoral activities increases with higher social and economic status, as those in better positions are more actively involved in politics than those in lower positions [11].

**Socio-cultural factor:** Women have never been considered good political players in Indian politics [12]. Patriarchal values and practices continue to dominate society by controlling women in both community and private life, making them vulnerable and placing them in an inferior position [13]. In India, women are restricted by culture and patriarchal norms in exercising their political right since most of them depend on male family members in voting, where married and older women have less freedom to exercise their right as voters, candidates and party members [14]. Even though men and women are legally equal, politics is still male-dominated, with men participating more actively in voting, campaigns, rallies, assemblies and voter mobilisation [15]. Women in politics remain underprivileged because of family pressures, social norms, gender stereotypes, discrimination and institutional barriers [16]. In India, people are more concerned with

the social life, family and kinship relations, however, traditional norms deprive women of significant freedom and do not provide them with an opportunity to participate in politics [17].

**Gender:** Research has shown that gender influences political behaviour and opinion significantly where women tend to support Democrats, liberals and welfare, equality as well as environmental policies more than men and are more conservative on issues involving morality [18]. Political attitude and behaviour between women and men is extremely different in India due to patriarchal rules, which do not consider women as able to engage in politics and make men dominant [19]. Women voting rate is similar as men, however, their lack of interest in political discussions and participation undermines the quality of democratic discussion and representation [20]. Gender norms prevalent in India restrict women's opportunities and systematically disenfranchise women at the political, economic and social spheres [21].

**Psychological variable:** Voting behaviour is influenced by psychological conditions such as political interest, efficacy, trust, and awareness, where political interest is a major consideration of gender limit to participation in voting [22]. Women in India are often apathetic towards politics and less inclined to engage in politics, talk about politics, attend public meetings, or influence discussions [23]. Women encounter numerous barriers in politics, including weak political networks, lack of skills, limited time and little family support. Along with this, problems like financial constraints, low confidence, and less political knowledge or experience make it difficult for them to actively participate in public and political life [24]. Whatever one's own personal obstacles, pervasive gender stereotypes have a powerful impact on women voters, influencing their mindset and personality, thereby diminishing their interest and involvement in politics [25].

**Party Identification:** Personal and emotional attachment to political parties contributes significantly to voting behaviour since there is always tendency to vote in support of their own party regardless of party actions and policies [26]. The identification to the party refers to the emotional attachment an individual develops towards a political party and in the majority of cases this attachment is created during an early age by the family or the society one inhabits. This attachment usually grows stronger over time, regardless of specific policies or issues [27]. After the Pulwama attack in India, emotional politics became very effective, as people's anger and grief turned into strong support for the BJP government, while rational debate and discussion were pushed aside [28]. Political parties such as BJP exploit this emotional attachment to ensure voters remain loyal to them even when their agenda contravenes ideals such as secularism [29].

**Personality and Candidate Orientation:** Where conventional factors such as party loyalty or group identification do not hold sway, the personality or personal charisma of party leaders can play an overwhelming role in the voter's decision-making [30]. Candidates and charisma are major factors in influencing voting behaviour in India as evident from the example of the "Modi Wave." Narendra Modi's popularity was a factor in the BJP's huge wins in 2014 and 2019, and it has strengthened right-wing politics while showing voters how much his persona determines their decision [31]. Leaders like Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Vajpayee, and Modi clearly show how a leader's charisma strongly influences the voting behaviour of people [32].

**Caste:** Caste is still a predictor of voting behaviour in India. It is rooted deeply in the society and forms an important foundation of social relations on all levels. Rajni Kothari said "Indian Politics is casteist, and caste is politicised". In his work, he explained how caste and politics in India are deeply interlinked. Caste influences political behaviour, while politics gives new shape and role to caste in modern India [33]. Even though the Constitution abolished discrimination on the basis of caste, castes remain a significant factor in Indian politics, as people vote almost exclusively along caste lines and political parties select a candidate or seek alliances based on caste. Brahmin votes Versus Jat votes or Jat votes Versus Ahir votes. Caste-based vote banks continue to play an important role in political planning as political parties try to exploit caste loyalties for sustainable electoral success [34]. As such, caste remains a factor behind political behaviour and plays a significant role in electoral politics in India.

**Issue Orientation:** Voters tend to make their electoral decisions based on certain issues that affect them directly, either at the national level (unemployment, inflation, corruption and security) or the local level (roads, water supply, electricity and schools). People are likely to support candidates or parties they believe can address these current and local problems effectively [35]. Pocketbook voting or making electoral choice based on one's own personal economic situation played huge role in deciding the result of 18<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Elections in India in 2024. Voters tend to vote for ruling party candidates when they feel that the ruling party government has been successful in running the economy, including providing employment opportunities and controlling inflation [36].

**Sub-Nationalism:** Sub-nationalism is a significant determinant in voting behaviour because of ethnic diversity, communalism and regionalism in India. Sub-nationalism feelings also cause people to elect regional parties that advance local or ethnic interests at the expense of nation building [37]. In some cases, secessionist parties even demand to have election boycotts or coerce voters not to vote in favour of some parties. Sometimes, secessionist groups like the Akali Dal factions, Naga Nationalist Organisation, Gorkha League, Jharkhand Party, AASU, and AAGSP in Assam used local slogans that stirred people's regional or ethnic feelings and influenced them to vote along those lines [38].

**Election campaigns:** In India, election campaigns are complicated procedures in which different political parties employ different methods to influence the voters to win the vote of the undecided voters or 'floating' voters. These campaigns are characterized by a blend of traditional and modern techniques, including mass meetings, personal contacts, poster war, film star speeches and the use of media such as TV, radio, and newspapers [39]. In India, the most important period for election campaigns is the "poll-eve" stage, when the identity, leadership or development promises become the centre of attraction for the undecided voters [40].

**Religion:** Religion is a prominent influence on the voting behaviour in India as the voters mostly vote for the party and candidate that they think will safeguard their religious identity and interests. Political parties also use religious emotions in electoral campaigns to gain votes making religion a great instrument to determine voting behaviour [41]. The presence of various communal parties such as the Muslim league, the Akali Dal, the Hindu Maha Sabha, Shiv Senas etc. has further added to the politicisation of religion. In India, religious pluralism has widely influenced the political system as parties strategise their campaigns based on religion and often nominate candidates from the majority religion to garner maximum votes. This has contributed significantly to the electoral successes of BJP in particular, such as in their growing number of seats in the Lok Sabha from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [42].

**Language:** The use of language is an effective criterion for political parties to reach out to diverse constituencies across India, and it is crucial to electoral campaigns in the country. At the national and regional levels, parties in India use language to articulate their stance in the political arena, think strategically, vote in numbers, work out policies and convert the various registered constituent elements of the constituencies into dominant vote banks [43]. The fact that states were reorganised on linguistic basis in India in 1956 is evidence of the significance of language in Indian politics. It led to the rise of regional parties such as DMK in Tamil Nadu, Akali Dal in Punjab or TDP in Andhra Pradesh who gained their power from language and regionalism [44]. People's deep emotional attachment to their languages makes them easily influenced by language-related issues, and these linguistic interests often play a strong role in shaping their voting behaviour.

**Money Factor:** Money plays an important role in determining the voting behaviour in India. During elections, political parties and candidates spend large amounts of money campaigning, mobilising supporters and sometimes distributing cash, gifts or welfare benefits to electors [45]. In many economically weaker and rural areas, financial incentives can have a significant impact on voter decisions, particularly where poverty makes people more susceptible. Studies have shown money power not only influences electoral competition but also corrupts free and fair elections by creating unequal opportunities for candidates [46]. Thus, money has become a significant factor in shaping electoral behaviour in India.

**Ideology:** Ideology is the major determinant of voter behaviour. Electors tend to vote for parties whose ideological views of nationalism, secularism, socialism or liberalism are similar to their own values and beliefs. Some voters vote for parties that have a strong nationalist focus while others prefer parties that are concerned with issues such as social justice, welfare programmes, or secular values. This shows how different ideologies attract different groups of voters [47]. The steady rise in BJP is a testament to the power of ideology. For Hindus, voting for BJP has become a retraction of Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva) in a bid to secure their favour by reinforcing Hindu cultural identity at the expense of minorities [48]. Thus, ideology offers a guiding framework for the voters to identify with parties that they feel represent their interests and their identity.

## Conclusion

Voting in India is decided by various factors like caste, religion, language, money, ideology and policies which determines the choice of people during elections. While Indian voters are gradually becoming more aware and issue-based, political parties still exploit these factors to gain votes. Freedom of thought, expression and association is the foundation of any working democracy as it allows people to make decisions for themselves, free from fear or intimidation. When citizens have the ability to think freely, openly express their opinions, and organise in groups, the vote they cast is truly their own will and not influenced by outside sources. However, if the elections are marred by manipulation, coercion or undemocratic practices like rigging and voter intimidation, the core of democracy is eroded and its spirit is marred. For elections to be meaningful they must be carried out in an environment of fairness and integrity, where people's choices are respected and protected. Only such elections can test the will of the people and establish the foundations of a great, inclusive and vital democracy.

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