



## **The Impact of Social, Economic and Political Determinants on Voting Behavior in India: An Analytical Study**

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### ***Abstract***

India is a diverse and densely populated democratic nation, where it is important to examine the multi-dimensional socio-economic and political factors that influence voting behavior. Through a comprehensive analysis of various determinants, including caste, religion and regional disparities, this study highlights the complex interrelationship between these elements and electoral choices.

**Keywords:** India; Voting Behavior; Factors.

### **Introduction: -**

India holds the distinction of being the world's largest democratic nation. However, various challenges such as casteism, communalism, linguistic divisions, and regionalism often pose serious threats to the existence and functioning of Indian democracy. In a democracy, people elect representatives who work on their behalf. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, famously defined democracy as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Today, most countries around the world claim to be democratic. Whether they truly function democratically or not is a matter for separate discussion, but one fact is certain—elections are essential for the functioning of a democracy. In this system, voting holds a crucial place as it allows citizens to elect their representatives. In any democracy, voting behavior is recognized as a significant factor in determining the level and health of democratic governance.

During elections, voters make decisions about casting their votes based on various factors, such as the personality of the leader, the caste and religion of the candidates, regional issues, and the personal interests of the voters themselves. Some of these determining factors are contemporary and have emerged as a result of political and social developments, while others are traditional and continue to shape voting behavior over time.

In the early years of independent India, factors such as caste, religion, and community were commonly considered when analyzing voting patterns. In the present times, there has been a notable shift in the voting behavior of the people. Now, greater emphasis is placed on the educational qualifications of the candidates, their involvement in corruption, socio-economic policies, foreign policies, and other related issues. However, these contemporary influences are more visible among the educated and urban populations, whereas traditional determinants continue to play a dominant role in the rural parts of the country. Currently, a combination of modern and traditional factors influences voting behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify the patterns of voting behavior and the various factors that determine it.

### **Voting Behavior: Meaning and Definition: -**

Voting is a significant component of democracy, as it allows people to express their will. We frequently use the term 'voting' in our everyday conversations, discussions, or debates. The term 'voting' refers to the expression of a citizen's "will" in support of or against a particular decision, policy, ideology, candidate, or party. In simple terms, voting is the process through which eligible voters choose their leaders or representatives. This constitutionally defined procedure sustains the parliamentary nature of democracy as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. This system of governance grants individuals the special privilege of exercising their right to vote at regular intervals or predetermined periods, typically every five or six years. The political party that wins the election officially declares itself victorious and assumes power. Article 326 of the Indian Constitution grants the right to vote to all individuals who attain the age of eighteen years.

Voting behavior, also known as electoral behavior, refers to the patterns that influence an individual's choice to vote for a particular party, ideology, or other factors, as well as the underlying reasons behind their voting decisions. Various researchers have provided different definitions of voting behavior.

According to Plano and Riggs, voting behavior refers to the study of "how individuals generally vote in public elections and the underlying motivations behind their voting choices."

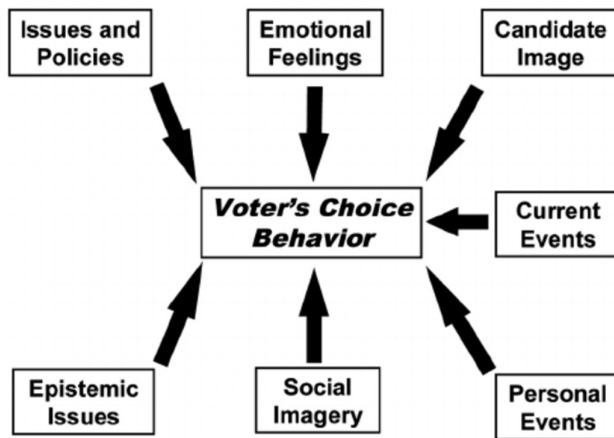
Gardner Marshall defines voting behavior as the "clear expression of voters' choices, preferences, options, ideologies, concerns, and compromises on various social and national issues."

Elections have always been a significant event for political parties and the general public. However, the celebratory spirit surrounding this event diminishes when divisive elements such as communalism, casteism, hatred, intolerance, regionalism, and the influence of money and physical power become associated with the electoral process.

### **Factors Influencing Voting Behavior: -**

India is known for its diversity, and as a result, the factors influencing voting behavior in the world's largest democracy are highly varied. Some individuals are driven by social inclinations, while others are guided by political, economic, ideological, and several other motivations. Figure 1 shows the factors affecting voter's choice.

### **Fig 1: Model of voter's choice behavior**



Source: Newman and Sheth (1985)

During elections in India, political parties and interest groups (pressure groups) often attempt to exploit communal, religious, caste-based, regional, and linguistic biases to influence people's voting preferences in undemocratic ways. Therefore, some of the major factors influencing voters' behavior are discussed below:

**Caste** – The concept of caste has consistently played a significant role in Indian politics, and the politicization of caste has become a common practice. It continues to be a highly influential factor in determining voting behavior. In India, all political parties (without exception) tend to adopt caste-based strategies. Political parties always consider caste equations while making policy decisions and forming action plans. Caste plays a critical role in various aspects of the political process, including the distribution of party tickets, campaigning by candidates, political speeches, and rallies. Rajni Kothari has noted that caste naturally influences Indian politics and is used as a political tool. The renowned scholar Paul Brass has stated that in rural areas of India, caste solidarity is the primary factor that influences voting behavior at the local level. At present, political parties are strategically using caste-related data of constituencies to select candidates from specific castes in order to increase their chances of winning seats. For example, in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) selected Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister to attract support from upper caste groups. Additionally, to showcase high-level representation of the Dalit community within the BJP, Dinesh Sharma and Swami Prasad Maurya were appointed as Deputy Chief Ministers. In national politics, the requirements of the party ensure that caste representation is politically balanced. The element of caste now even influences party manifestos, where parties sometimes promise specific benefits for particular castes to secure their votes.

**Regionalism** – Regional political parties appeal to voters on the basis of regional sentiments. In daily conversations, we often hear statements like “Where has this outsider come from? This city belongs to us.” India's rich diversity acts as a catalyst for regionalism. The country is home to a wide range of languages, religions, castes, cultures, ethnic groups, and communities. The presence of these cultures, communities, or ethnic groups at regional and sub-regional levels promotes regionalism.

There is a complex relationship between regionalism and linguistic identity in India, with each region showcasing its distinct language and culture. For example, states such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan primarily speak Hindi, which results in the dominance

of Hindi-speaking leaders. On the other hand, the region of West Bengal speaks Bengali, contributing to the widespread influence of Bengali culture. Language has played a crucial role in encouraging the development of sub-nationalism and regionalism. Political leaders have long used phrases in their speeches and rallies such as “The land of Bihar has called me,” “Mother Ganga has summoned me,” “Boys from UP,” and “Gujarat is my motherland” to appeal for votes.

**Money Power** – A large segment of India's population lives in poverty or below the poverty line (BPL). Employment conditions in the country are unfavorable, and millions are unemployed. In some regions, high mortality rates are caused by severe malnutrition. According to available data, financial incentives influence the voting behavior of economically disadvantaged individuals. Throughout the history of Indian elections, money has consistently played a role in gaining public support. Therefore, the role of money in influencing voting behavior cannot be underestimated. During elections, politicians often engage in the practice of offering direct or indirect financial incentives to voters in exchange for their support. Additionally, individuals may sell their votes, and leaders may distribute food, alcohol, and other resources to advance their electoral ambitions. From large-scale parliamentary elections to small-scale panchayat elections, the use of money is widespread at all levels of the electoral process.

The Election Commission has taken note of the unique nature of this issue and has established laws and regulations concerning participating parties and candidates. However, these laws and regulations have not been entirely successful in effectively curbing the use of money in elections.

**Religion or Communalism** – India is a country where multiple religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, and others coexist. Within this rich cultural landscape, diverse beliefs and faiths are present. However, politicians often exploit people's beliefs and emotions to gain votes. Hate speeches, policy decisions that promote divisions among religious groups, and various religious strategies provoke public sentiments during the electoral process. In India, apart from caste, religion also plays a significant role in shaping people's voting preferences. Frequently, ruling parties use religious sentiments—even through legislation—to gain political advantages. Additionally, their election manifestos also address religious and community issues with the same objective.

Communalism has had such a harmful impact that it led to the partition of India, resulting in the formation of India and Pakistan based on communal population divisions. India is primarily identified with two major national parties—namely, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Under the banner of secularism, the INC strategically appeals to both Hindu and Muslim voter groups, while the BJP focuses on garnering support from Hindu voters through the promotion of Hindutva ideology. As a result, both parties engage in communal politics. The impact of communal politics extends beyond national elections to state assembly elections, as well as smaller-scale elections such as those for panchayats and municipalities.

**Ideology** – Political leaders often use the term “ideology.” We can frequently observe leaders appealing for support based on ideologies such as democracy, secularism, liberalism, socialism, or patriotism. Furthermore, it is evident that certain individuals within our cultures are deeply committed to particular sets of beliefs and often vote for political parties that align with the

ideology they identify with. Therefore, it may be argued that ideology plays a significant role in influencing voters' decisions. For instance, in Indian politics, parties such as the BJP, SP, Congress, and others claim to support Gandhian ideology, secularism, and humanism. However, the real question is whether they genuinely adhere to these principles. It is easy for anyone to claim allegiance to a certain ideology, but applying those beliefs in action is far more challenging—especially in the domains of politics and governance.

**The Farmers' Issue** – The agricultural sector has always held a vital place in India. Nearly half of the population depends on agriculture as their primary source of income. Moreover, agriculture contributes approximately 15 percent to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, farmers and the agricultural sector face specific challenges, often resulting in nationwide protests. Farmers have several pressing concerns, the most prominent of which include the following:

- Farmers often protest for the implementation of the Minimum Support Price (MSP).
- Indian farmers primarily depend on the monsoon for water supply. The government can take measures to reduce this dependency by improving irrigation systems.
- Farmers' demand for loan waivers is frequently the starting point of political discourse. For example, during the 2014 assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress Party included a promise of farm loan waivers in its manifesto. This promise significantly appealed to those engaged in agriculture and influenced their voting behavior as a result.

The government often fails to prioritize critical needs such as the Minimum Support Price, efficient irrigation systems, mechanization, availability of affordable seeds, and proper grain storage facilities.

**Performance of the Ruling Party** – Political parties often make numerous promises during election campaigns, sometimes even exaggerating them. However, when it comes to fulfilling those promises, they frequently fall short of expectations. As a result, in subsequent elections, these parties face scrutiny from the public. On several occasions, Indian voters have demonstrated that the conduct of the ruling party directly influences their voting behavior. For instance, in 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured a significant majority, delivering a major setback to the Congress Party. The BJP came to power by making a wide range of promises on issues such as black money, corruption, development (Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas), Hindutva, and the Ram Mandir dispute. Their promises included bringing back all illicit funds and depositing ₹15 lakh into every Indian's bank account, constructing the Ram Temple in Ayodhya as mentioned in their manifesto, generating 2 crore jobs annually, reducing price inflation, implementing a 33 percent quota for women in central and state legislatures, appointing a Lokpal, and ensuring that farmers receive 50 percent profit above their production costs.

### **Conclusion: -**

India's diverse nature encompasses several determinants that influence voting behavior. Since independence, numerous elections have been conducted in the country, and factors such as caste, religion, language, and region have consistently played a significant role in deciding the ruling party or leader. These elements pose a threat to Indian democracy as they can lead to the dominance of a particular caste, language, wealth, or power. Such a situation weakens

the democratic framework. However, it is undeniable that people do not vote solely on the basis of these factors. With the rise in education, modernization, and acceptance of rationality, a large number of individuals also consider various other aspects such as the candidate's educational background, involvement in criminal activities, performance, foreign and national policies, general administration, law and order, and more. Nonetheless, certain additional reforms are necessary. These include providing high-quality education, preventing criminal leaders from contesting elections, reducing poverty, ensuring proper voter education, generating employment opportunities, resolving issues faced by farmers, upholding justice for all, and, most importantly, ensuring that political parties and leaders do not exploit religion, caste, region, language, etc., to influence voters. Alternatively, we must advocate for the implementation of strict laws that restrict the use of such factors, thereby promoting equality within the system and fostering the development of a more refined democracy.

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