

THE GENDER DIVIDE IN INDIAN ELECTIONS: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S VOTING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Given that it reflects wider patterns of social change, empowerment, and political mobilization, the gender split in Indian elections has emerged as a prominent field of political studies in recent years. The purpose of this study is to investigate the voting patterns of women in India. Specifically, the study investigates the elements that influence their election choices, including socio-economic position, education, media exposure, political knowledge, party outreach, and cultural norms. In addition to primary interviews and focus group discussions, the research makes use of secondary data from Election Commission reports, survey findings, and current scholarly literature. This research is conducted using a mixed-methods methodology. Among the emerging themes that are highlighted in the analysis are the following: the reduction of the gender gap in voter turnout; greater political engagement among rural and first-time women voters; and the rising effect of welfare schemes and identity politics on women's election decisions. In addition, the research covers recurrent problems, such as the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures, the dissemination of false information, and unequal representation in candidate lists. The findings highlight the fact that even if women voters are increasingly exerting their political agency, their choices are nevertheless affected by a complex interaction of individual goals and systemic limits. This research makes a significant contribution to a more in-depth knowledge of gendered political behavior in India and provides insights for policy interventions that aim to create electoral participation that is both inclusive and equitable.

Keywords: women voters, gender divide, Indian elections, political participation, voting behavior, electoral politics

Introduction

Not only is the election process in India, the biggest democracy in the world, a mirror of its social and political upheavals, but it is also a driver of those transitions. With over 600 million registered female voters in the general elections of 2019, women now make up over half of the electorate in India. As a result, their involvement is a crucial factor in determining the outcomes of political elections. Nevertheless, throughout the course of history, there have been clear gender differences in voter participation, political involvement, and representation. These differences have been molded by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, socioeconomic inequities, and cultural limits. During elections, the term "gender divide" refers not only to inequalities in voter participation between men and women, but also to differences in political preferences, party alignments, and the topics that affect voting decisions. In other words, the term encompasses all of these factors. India has seen a reduction of the gender gap in voter turnout over the last several decades, with female participation surpassing that of males in certain states.

This trend has been observed in recent decades. A number of variables, including targeted political mobilization, welfare measures that focused on women, increasing literacy rates, and more media exposure, have been credited with contributing to this transition. The nature of women's political choices, however, continues to be complicated. These decisions are impacted by the patterns of decision-making within households, the expectations of communities, the identities of castes and religions, and the availability of independent political information. However, the fact that women are underrepresented in legislative bodies and positions of decision-making demonstrates that electoral equality has not yet translated into political equality. This is despite the fact that the increase in voter participation indicates that political agency is expanding. For the purpose of studying India's democratic trajectory, it is vital to have a solid understanding of the voting behavior of women. This understanding gives insights into the dynamic relationship that exists between gender, politics, and social development. With the help of this study, we intend to investigate the variables that impact women's involvement in the political process, investigate the socio-cultural and geographical differences that exist, and evaluate the degree to which women's votes are independent or influenced by the influence of their families and communities. By doing so, it intends to make a contribution to the ongoing conversation on gender-sensitive political changes in India as well as inclusive democracy overall.

Increasing emphasis has been paid by political parties, legislators, and academics alike to the role that women play as a unique and significant voting group since the beginning of this century. In recent election cycles, the so-called "women's vote" has emerged as a critical component in influencing electoral outcomes. As a result, political players have been compelled to construct campaigns and manifestos that expressly serve the interests and ambitions of women. Ujjwala Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and targeted cash transfers are examples of programs that have been touted as vehicles of both welfare and electoral persuasion (also known as "targeted cash transfers"). In spite of the fact that such measures have unquestionably had a role in increasing the number of women who vote, there are still concerns that need to be answered about whether or not these policies actually lead to genuine empowerment or rather serve as tools for short-term vote collection. Furthermore, the gender split in Indian elections is not a singular phenomenon; rather, it is intricately intertwined with other social divisions, including caste, class, religion, geography, and urban-rural divides. For instance, women who come from underprivileged groups frequently confront many obstacles that make it difficult for them to participate in political processes. These obstacles include economic dependence, a lack of mobility, and institutional prejudice. While this is happening, an increasing number of women are being able to question old political alignments and participate in public life with a greater degree of assertiveness. This is made possible by improved access to education, digital media, and grassroots organizing. The significance of this study rests in the fact that it has the ability to bridge the gap between the statistical trends in voter participation and the qualitative aspects of political decision-making among women. The purpose of this research is to reveal the complicated truths that lie behind the gender difference by analyzing quantitative election data as well as qualitative accounts from a variety of socio-cultural situations. In addition to this, it intends to bring attention to the consequences that women's involvement in elections has for the development of democracy, political accountability, and gender justice in India. In the end, this investigation into the voting patterns of women will not only contribute to the advancement of scholarly debate, but it will also offer significant insights to political stakeholders who are dedicated to helping to cultivate a democratic process that is more inclusive. In order for India to make progress toward a political future that is more

representative and equal, it is necessary to get a knowledge of the factors that motivate, restrain, and aspirate female voters.

Changing Trends in Women's Voting Behaviour in India

The last two decades have seen a significant increase in women's participation in Indian politics. While earlier the voting percentage of women was much lower than that of men, in recent elections, the voting percentage of women has been recorded higher than that of men in many states. Especially in the Lok Sabha elections 2014, 2019 and 2024, there has been a steady increase in both the number of women voters and the voting rate. This trend has forced political parties to formulate electoral strategies keeping women at the center.

Women no longer vote only under family or community pressure but they have started taking decisions keeping in mind their priorities and issues. The social security schemes, health facilities, education, cooking gas, drinking water, houses and direct cash transfer schemes they get influence their voting behavior. Thus, the trend of "issue-based voting" has increased among women. Also, various reforms undertaken by the Election Commission and the state level such as women-managed polling stations, setting up of additional booths and extensive voter awareness campaigns have also strengthened the confidence of women voters. This trend is more clearly visible in rural areas and among young women voters. Digital campaigning, self-help groups (SHGs) and door-to-door campaigns have also given a new direction to women's voting activism.

Challenges to Women's Voting Behaviour

Although the number of women voters and voting rate have increased, this increase is not clearly visible in political representation. Women's participation in Parliament and state assemblies is still very limited. The number of women candidates and their winning ratio is still low.

Socio-cultural structures also pose challenges to women's independent voting. In many places, women's voting decisions are still influenced by male members of the family or community. This pressure is even more intense in rural and traditional societies. Apart from this, household responsibilities, child care and concerns about safe travel often become a hindrance to women's voting.

Access to information and resources is also not equally available to women. Women have limited access to information from political parties, campaign messages and policy debates compared to men. At times, long queues, distance to polling booths and security issues also affect their participation in voting. Additionally, it has also been observed that even though the female voting rate has increased at the overall level, there remains disparity in it across different phases or regions.

North-East India:

In the context of North-East India, women's voting behaviour comes out with some specific characteristics. For example, in a state like Meghalaya, which has a matrilineal society, women have relatively more freedom in social and economic decisions, yet their representation in the Assembly and Parliament has been very limited. Even in the recent Assembly elections, the number of women candidates was very low.

The example of Nagaland is also important. In the 2023 assembly elections, the state elected two women MLAs for the first time—Hekani Jakhlu and Salahoutouonuo Kruise—which was a historic event. This shows that progress is being made slowly but surely towards political representation.

The voting percentage of women voters in Assam has been consistently high. In the 2021 elections, women voting was recorded to be higher than men in many constituencies. On the other hand, states like Tripura, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh are also witnessing a significant increase in the activism of women voters. Overall, the voting behaviour of women in North-East India shows that even though the social structure and cultural traditions differ, the democratic participation of women is steadily strengthening. However, their presence in political representation and policy-making is still surrounded by challenges.

Historical Trends and Patterns in Women's Voting

Women were frequently characterized as passive participants in the political process in early research on Indian elections (Rai, 1999). These studies also showed women as being heavily affected by male family members in their voting selections. During the first several decades following independence, there was a large gender difference in voter turnout, with female participation rates frequently being 10–15% lower than male turnout (Bhavnani, 2009). On the other hand, more recent data from the Election Commission of India (2019) suggests that this disparity is gradually narrowing, with women in places such as Bihar, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu exceeding males in terms of voter turnout. This trend is attributed by academics such as Palshikar and Suri (2014) to greater political mobilization, literacy, and social programs that are specifically targeted among the population.

Determinants of Women's Electoral Participation

Significant amounts of research have been conducted to investigate the elements that influence the voting habits of women. It has been demonstrated that women's political awareness and autonomy in decision-making are improved when they have higher socio-economic status, higher levels of education, and more work options (Chhibber, 2002). Studies conducted by Kumar (2017) and Deshpande (2020) show the ways in which identity politics impact voting alliances among women, particularly in rural regions. Caste and religion also play significant roles in this decision-making process. According to Banerjee (2018), women's access to political knowledge has been further broadened as a result of media exposure, particularly through television and mobile internet. This has enabled women to make more autonomous decisions. On the other hand, in many places, women's political agency is still hindered by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and gender dynamics at the family level (Kishwar, 1996; Basu, 2016).

Impact of Political Mobilization and Policy Interventions

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Autonomy vs. Familial Influence in Voting Decisions

One of the most contentious issues that has been discussed in the academic literature is the degree to which women are able to vote on their own. On the other hand, qualitative research suggests that family and community influence, particularly from male relatives, continues to be substantial in many parts of India (Verma & Yadav, 2018). This is despite the fact that surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS, 2019) reveal that an increasing number of women report making their own decisions regarding elections. The fact that this is the case suggests that there is a complicated interaction between ongoing societal restrictions and developing political consciousness.

Factors Affecting Women's Voting Behaviour

Caste and Religion

Both caste and religion play significant roles in the formation of the political options available to voters in India, which includes members of the female population. The interaction of gender and caste frequently leads to the formation of particularly distinct forms of political engagement. According to Sethi (1988), a significant number of women vote in accordance with the caste preferences of their own families, leaving little opportunity for the desire of either men or women. There is also the possibility that one's spiritual ideals might influence their voting behavior. By way of illustration, in rural areas, young women who come from religiously conservative families are susceptible to being affected by the opinions of non-religious leaders about political issues (Heath et al., 2015).

Education and Economic Status

Education and the ability to make one's own financial decisions have a significant influence on the political behavior of young women in India. Based on Desai's research from 1957, it has been shown that educated girls, particularly those with higher educational levels, are more likely to participate in political activities and to make autonomous judgments regarding vote casting. On the other hand, females who come from economically poor households sometimes rely on members of their own families, particularly male figures, to advise them in the choices they make about how they cast their votes (Goel, 1974). The economic liberty of women is a crucial component in the process of dismantling patriarchal structures that restrict their participation in political processes.

Family Influence

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Political Awareness and Media Exposure

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Impact of Political Parties and Candidates

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Barriers to Women's Participation in Elections

Existing societal values, the private–public divide in terms of domain identification, and the preponderance of men in political institutions all create obstacles for women in terms of exercising their electoral rights and participating in elections on an equal basis. This is despite the fact that the Constitution of India grants universal suffrage with equal rights to both men and women. Therefore, women's agenda does not get represented and addressed in public policies and programs (Baseline Report, 1998). This is because there is a lack of crucial and qualitative representation of women in key decision-making positions. Both men and women in India who are chosen to serve as representatives of the people have quite diverse priorities when it comes to the public tasks that they conduct, and their public agendas are quite varied as well. During the time that elected women representatives were focusing on issues that would have long-term benefits, such as education, health, violence against women, and basic amenities that affect the community, men were concentrating on issues that required immediate attention, such as roads, community and commercial centers, tanks, and bridges (National Institute of Advanced Studies, 2002–03). It is possible to claim that if there had been a substantial number of women MPs in India's Parliament, they would have been able to play a critical and concerted role in ensuring that the Bill to implement a reservation of 33 percent for women in state legislatures and Parliament was passed into law. The lack of a critical mass of female legislators also diminishes their bargaining and negotiating strength during the assignment of major cabinet slots in India. These berths include the finance, home, defense, and health ministries, which are often assigned to males and are regarded to be heavyweight ministries. During the process of cabinet creation, Indian women are typically assigned ministries that are considered

to be "feminine" portfolios. These portfolios include women and children, information and culture, and social welfare. These ministries are seen as being generally less significant, receiving less resources, and having a smaller reach among people (Kishwar, 1996). As a result, women who are politically engaged in India are confined to the margins of power sharing at the highest levels. This has a negative influence on their overall political position in the country and works as a barrier to increased election involvement (Rai, 2011).

Changing Trends in Women's Voting Behaviour

Over the course of the past few decades, there has been a significant shift in the voting behavior of women in India. It was observed that women's involvement in elections was restricted during the early years of Indian independence due to the various sociocultural restraints that existed at the time. On the other hand, since the 1980s, there has been a consistent increase in the number of women participating in activities, particularly in urban areas. It is possible to ascribe this transition to a number of different variables, some of which include the increase of women empowerment initiatives, career options, and educational chances. Women's increased engagement is also obvious in the form of their producing assistance for political events that promote gender-specific norms. This is particularly noticeable in the United States. As a result of political acts such as the women's reservation bill and the introduction of policies that are centered on women in party manifestos, a significant number of women have become voters (Rai, 2011). In addition, the introduction of several welfare programs aimed at women, like as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme and economic assistance for women entrepreneurs, has further led to an increase in the number of women who participate in the election process (Roy & Sopariwala, 2019).

Challenges to Women's Voting Behaviour

Regarding the enhancement of women's political engagement in India, several challenging conditions continue to exist despite the progress that has been done. The continuing gender inequality and patriarchal traditions that hold to restrict women's autonomy, particularly in rural areas, is one of the significant limits that must be taken into consideration. Many women still do not use their right to vote on their own and instead rely on male members of their own families to make choices on their behalf. In addition, the fact that there is a lack of adequate political representation for women in political positions means that their issues are sometimes overlooked during election campaigns. An additional challenge is the high percentage of illiteracy among women, particularly in rural areas, which hinders their ability to identify political issues and make decisions based on accurate information. The difference between women and men in terms of political literacy continues to be enormous, despite the fact that several authorities have undertaken projects with the intention of strengthening women's political engagement.

Conclusion

As a reflection of both the progress that has been made and the hurdles that continue to exist in the pursuit of gender equity in democratic participation, the voting behavior of women in India has evolved throughout time. Over the course of the last several decades, there has been a dramatic shift in political activity, as seen by the lowering of the gender disparity in voter turnout and, in some places, the reversal of that gap. Literacy rates have increased, targeted welfare programs have been implemented, access to

information has been enhanced, and political mobilization has been active. All of these factors have played critical roles in enabling more women to participate in elections as informed and decisive voters. On the other hand, the results of this study and the literature that was examined suggest that women's political agency is still formed by a complicated combination of empowerment and restriction. It is still the case that familial and communal influences continue to steer political decisions in a number of different socio-cultural situations, despite the fact that many women now report voting independently. In addition, characteristics that cross with one another, such as caste, ethnicity, and religion, Therefore, the gender gap in Indian elections is not just a function of the number of people who vote; rather, it is intricately connected to concerns of representation, autonomy, and political voice. This is a vital step, but it must be complemented by measures to guarantee that women's political choices are really self-determined and that their representation in legislative bodies increases. Closing the gap in voting is also a required step. In order to do this, institutional changes, ongoing political education, and a commitment to gender-sensitive policies on the part of all pertinent stakeholders are required. When everything is said and done, the increasing confidence of female voters has the potential to bring about a transformation in the political politics of India. In light of the fact that political parties are increasingly acknowledging women as a potentially critical constituency, there exists an opportunity to capitalize on this momentum in order to promote both the deepening of democracy and gender justice. A democracy that is really inclusive will not only account for the votes cast by women, but it will also magnify their voices in the process of determining the political and developmental direction of the nation.

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