



Voting Behaviour

MEANING OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Voting behaviour is also known as electoral behaviour. It is a form of political behaviour. It implies the behaviour of voters in the context of elections in a democratic political system.

Voting behaviour (or the study of voting behaviour) is defined in the following way:

Plano and Riggs: “Voting behaviour is a field of study concerned with the ways in which people tend to vote in public elections and the reasons why they vote as they do.”

Gordon Marshall: “The study of voting behaviour invariably focuses on the determinants of why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they make”.¹

Oinam Kulabidhu: “Voting behaviour may be defined as the behaviour that explicitly reflects voter’s choices, preferences, alternatives, ideologies, concerns, agreements, and programmes in respect of various issues, questions pertaining to the society and nation”.²

Stephen Wasby: “The study of voting behaviour involves an analysis of individual psychological make-up and their relation to political action as well as institutional patterns, such as the communication process and their impact on elections”.³

SIGNIFICANCE OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Psephology, a branch of political science, deals with the scientific study of voting behaviour. This is a new term popularised by the American political scientists and political sociologists.

The recorded history of voting goes back, at least, to the Greek Polis. The modern world for the study of voting behaviour, psephology, derives from the classical Greek 'Psephos', the piece of pottery on which certain votes, mainly about the banishment of those seen as dangerous to the state, were inscribed.⁴

The study of voting behaviour is significant for the following reasons:⁵

1. It helps in comprehending the process of political socialisation.
2. It helps in examining the internalisation of democracy as a value among the elite as well as masses.
3. It emphasises the real impact of revolutionary ballot box.
4. It enables to throw light as to how far the electoral politics continue or break with the past.
5. It helps to measure whether it is modern or primordial in the context of political development.

According to N.G.S. Kini, voting behaviour can be regarded as:

1. A mode of legitimising democratic rule;
2. Instancing "participation" in the political process involving integration into the political community;
3. Instancing an act of decision-making;
4. A role-action involving definite political orientation imbedded in a particular type of political culture; or
5. A direct relation of the individual citizens to the formal government.

DETERMINANTS OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Indian society is highly diversified in nature and composition. Hence, voting behaviour in India is determined or influenced by multiple factors. These several factors can be divided, into two broad categories, namely, socio-economic factors and political factors. These are explained below:

1. **Caste:** Caste is an important factor influencing the behaviour of voters.

Politicisation of caste and casteism in politics has been a remarkable feature of Indian politics. Rajni Kothari said “Indian politics is casteist, and caste is politicised”.⁶ While formulating their election strategies, the political parties always take into account the factor of caste.

Paul Brass has very-well explained the role of caste factor in the Indian voting behaviour in the following way: “At the local level, in the country side, by far the most important factor in voting behaviour remains caste solidarity. Large and important castes in a constituency tend to back either a respected member of their caste or a political party with whom their caste members identify. However, local factions and local-state factional alignments that involve inter-caste coalitions, are also important factors in influencing voting behaviour”.⁷

2. **Religion:** Religion is another significant factor which influences the electoral behaviour. Political parties indulge in communal propaganda and exploit the religious sentiments of the voters. The existence of various communal parties has further added to the politicisation of religion. Despite India being a secular nation, no political party ignores the influence of religion in electoral politics.
3. **Language:** Linguistic considerations of the people influence their voting behaviour. During elections, the political parties arouse the linguistic feelings of the people and try to influence their decision-making. The re-organisation of states (in 1956 and later) on language basis clearly reflects the significance of language factor in Indian politics. The rise of some political parties like DMK in Tamil Nadu and TDP in Andhra Pradesh can be attributed to the linguism.⁸
4. **Region:** Regionalism and sub-regionalism play an important role in voting behaviour. These parochial feelings of sub-nationalism led to the emergence and perpetuation of regional parties in various states. These regional parties appeal to the electorate on the ground of regional identities and regional sentiments. Sometimes, the secessionist parties call for the boycott of elections.
5. **Personality:** The charismatic⁹ personality of the party leader plays an important role in electoral behaviour. Thus, the towering image of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Jay Prakash Narayan, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi has significantly influenced the

electorate to vote in favour of their parties. Similarly, at the state level also, the charismatic personality of the regional party leader has been a significant factor of popular support in the elections.

6. **Money:** The role of money factor cannot be overlooked in explaining the voting behaviour. Despite the limitations on the election expenditures, crores of rupees are spent on elections. The voters seek money or liquor or goods in return for their votes. In other words, 'votes' are freely exchanged for 'notes'. However, money can influence the decisions of the voters only in the normal circumstances and not in a wave election.

Paul Brass has very-well explained the meaning of a wave election in the following way: "A wave election is one in which a clear tendency begins to develop among the electorate in a single direction and in favour of a national party or its leader. It is based upon an issue or set of issues that transcend local calculations and coalition and draws the bulk of the uncommitted and wavering voters in the same direction as the word spreads from village to village and tea stall to tea stall".¹⁰

7. **Performance of the Ruling Party:** On the eve of elections, every political party releases its election manifesto containing the promises made by it to the electorate. The performance of the ruling party is judged by the electorate on the basis of its election manifesto. The defeat of Congress Party in 1977 elections and that of Janata Party in 1980 elections illustrates that the performance of the ruling party influences the voting behaviour. Thus, the anti-incumbency factor (which means dissatisfaction with the performance of the ruling party) is a determinant of electoral behaviour.
8. **Party Identification:** Personal and emotional association with political parties plays a role in determining voting behaviour. People who identify themselves with a particular party will always vote for that party irrespective of its omissions and commissions. Party identification was especially strong in the 1950s and 1960s. However, since the 1970s, there has been a decline in the number of strong party identifiers.
9. **Ideology:** The political ideology professed by a political party has a bearing on the decision-making of the voters. Some people in the society are committed to certain ideologies like communism, capitalism, democracy, secularism, patriotism, decentralisation and so on. Such

people generally support the candidates put up by the parties professing those ideologies. However, it must be printed out here that the number of such people is low.

10. **Other Factors:** In addition to the above-explained factors, there are also various other factors which determine the voting behaviour of the Indian electorate. These are mentioned below:

- (i) Political events preceding an election like war, murder of a leader, corruption scandals, etc.
- (ii) Economic conditions at the time of election like inflation, food shortage, unemployment, etc.
- (iii) Factionalism – a feature of Indian politics from bottom to top levels
- (iv) Age – old or young
- (v) Sex – men or women
- (vi) Education – educated or uneducated
- (vii) Habitation – rural or urban
- (viii) Class (income) – rich or poor
- (ix) Family and kinship
- (x) Candidate orientation
- (xi) Election campaign
- (xii) Political family background
- (xiii) Role of media

ROLE OF MEDIA IN ELECTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR

The following points explain the role of media in elections and voting behaviour:¹¹

1. Information Dissemination

Information dissemination in relation to elections, particularly during the process of elections is extremely important for all stakeholders. Starting from the announcement of elections to nomination, scrutiny, campaign, security arrangements, polling, counting, declaration of results, etc., all of these require widest circulation. The voter comes to know about the basics like: what, when, where and how of elections generally through the media. Even last minute changes of polling arrangements, violation of Model Code of

Conduct (MCC), and violation of expenditure instructions, any untoward incidents or disturbances promptly come to the notice not only of the people but also of the Election Commission through the media.

Newspapers and news channels have very enthusiastically made use of the information relating to educational, financial and criminal antecedents of candidates, contained in the affidavit filed by them along with their nomination paper, which is immediately uploaded on the Election Commission's website. This has contributed to further honesty and transparency in the election system.

2. Enforcement of MCC and other Laws

In today's democratic and political landscape, the watch-dog role of the media is quite vital. Media can highlight incidents of use of muscle and money power by political parties or candidates and educate the electors on ethical and inducement-free voting practices. It can also expose violations of the MCC such as divisive or hate speeches or unverified allegations in campaigns aimed at influencing electors. Violations reported by media are followed up by the Election Commission as in dealing with formal complaints.

The media can sensitise the political functionaries and the electorate about the MCC and relevant laws and instructions governing the conduct of elections.

3. Compliance to Election Laws

The Election Commission does not regulate media. It has however, the responsibility to enforce the provisions of law or Court directions, which might have linkages with media or certain aspects of media functioning. During elections, media is present and active at all stages which would also mean that they too conform to various laws governing the elections. These laws are mentioned below:

- (i) *Section 126A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951*: It prohibits conduct of exit poll and dissemination of their results during the period mentioned therein, i.e., the hour fixed for commencement of polls in the

first phase and half hour after the time fixed for close of poll for the last phase in all the States and Union Territories.

- (ii) *Section 126 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951*: It prohibits displaying any election matter by mean of cinematograph, television or other similar apparatus, during the period of 48 hours ending with the hour fixed for conclusion of poll.
- (iii) *Section 127A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951*: The printing and publication of election pamphlets, posters, etc. is governed by its provisions, which make it mandatory to bear on its face the names and addresses of the printer and the publisher.
- (iv) *Section 171H of the Indian Penal Code*: It prohibits incurring of expenditure on, **inter alia**, advertisement without the authority of the contesting candidate.

4. Voter Education and Participation

There is scope for a much larger and committed partnership from media in the crucial area of voter awareness and participation. This is one of the most promising areas of the Election Commission–media relationship.

There is a gap between what the voters ‘should know’ and what they ‘actually know’ in important areas like registration, EPIC/ identity proofs, Polling Station location, use of EVMs, timings of the poll, use of money/ muscle power by candidates etc. The elector should be well-informed when he/she goes to exercise his/ her franchise on the day of the polls.

Voter education helps build an environment where values of democracy are understood and acted upon by the population. Media and civil society have an important role to play in fostering such an environment. To improve participation of all sections of the electorate, awareness levels need to be enhanced, especially amongst the freshly eligible youth, uneducated, residents of far-flung, inaccessible and remote areas, and socially and economically weaker sections of the society. Such segments need to be reached through the Media, apart from civil society and field based organisations. The Election Commission has in place a framework of engagement for collaboration between the Commission and Media Houses/ Organisations in this important area of voter participation. The Election

Commission expects that the Media should volunteer to take up this task of informing, motivating and facilitating citizens to take part in the democratic elections.

5. Responsibility of Government Media

In broadcast of election related news or analysis, Public Service Broadcasters are expected to lead by example in terms of neutrality and objectivity, and adhere to various guidelines including their own.

The Election Commission has a fruitful arrangement with Prasar Bharati in providing free broadcast time on All India Radio and Doordarshan to recognised National and State parties so as to ensure a level playing field in elections. The political parties in this manner can reach out to every corner of the country, even in the remotest parts. In addition to this, Prasar Bharati's contribution in spreading voter awareness and educating the public about their voting rights and responsibilities is of great consequence to the inclusion of all in the electoral process. The contribution of Prasar Bharati has come in good measure in this arena.

The Election Commission also urges PIB, DAVP, National Film Development Corporation, Directorate of Field Publicity, Song and Drama Division and many other Central and State Information Directorates/ Departments to come forward and shoulder the same responsibility.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Gordon Marshall, *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, First Indian Edition, 2004, p.696.
2. Oinam Kulabidhu, *Electoral Politics in Manipur*, 1980–1995 (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Manipur University, 1998).
3. Stephen L. Wasby, Political Science: *The Discipline and its Dimensions*, 1972, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta, p.308.
4. David Robertson, *The Penguin Dictionary of Politics*, Second Edition, 1993, p.485.
5. K.R. Acharya (Ed.), *Perspectives on Indian Government and Politics*, Second Edition, 1991, S. Chand & Company Ltd., p.403.
6. Caste in Indian politics and politics in India are the two major

contributions of Rajni Kothari to the study of Indian politics.

7. Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, Second Edition, Cambridge University Press, pp. 97–98.
8. Linguism means love for one's language and hatred towards other language-speaking people.
9. 'Charisma' means exceptional and attractive qualities of a leader.
10. Paul R. Brass, *The 1984 Parliamentary Elections in Uttar Pradesh*, Asian Survey, June, 1986.
11. *Handbook for Media–2014*, Election Commission of India, pp.14–17.