

Voting Behaviour in India and Its Determinants

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Introduction

„Voting“ is one of the most commonly used terms in contemporary age of democratic politics. The ever increasing popularity of democratic theory and practice has even made this term a household name. In democratic systems, and their number is quite large and even increasing, each adult citizen uses „voting“ as a means for expressing his approval or disapproval of governmental decisions, policies and programmes of various political parties and the qualities of the candidates who are engaged in the struggle to get the status of being the representatives of the people. In a limited way voting refers to the function of electing representatives by casting votes in elections. However, in broad terms, as Richard Rose and Harve Massavir point out, voting covers as many as six important functions:-

1. It involves individual's choice of governors or major governmental policies;
2. It permits individuals to participate in a reciprocal and continuing exchange of influence with office- holders and candidates;
3. It contributes to the development or maintenance of an individual's allegiance to the existing constitutional regime;

4. It contributes to the development or maintenance of a voter's disaffection from existing constitutional regime;
5. It has emotional significance for individuals; and
6. For some individuals it may be functionless *i.e* devoid of any emotional or political significant personal consequences.

„Voting“ as such is a function of immense significance for the voters, the candidates and the students of politics. The study of voting behaviour has come to be regarded as an important aspect of contemporary political research and theory.

What Is Voting Behaviour

Samuel S. Eldersveld in his article „Theory and 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.” Voting behaviour is not confined to the examination of voting statistics, records and computation of electoral shifts and swings. It also involves an analysis of individual psychological processes (perception, emotion, and motivation) and their relation to political action as well as of institutional patterns, such as the communication process and their impact on election. In the words of Plano and Riggs, “Voting Behaviour is a field of study concerned with the ways in which people tend to vote in public election and the reasons why they vote as they do.” The term voting behaviour has recently been expended in meaning and is taken as one major and broad area of study subsumed within the broader designation of political behavior. It involves a study of human political behaviour in the context of voting in elections. Voting behaviour studies open windows on the minds of the millions of people who are involved in the political process as voters. These constitute an important area of political science in which theory can be systematically and qualitatively measured and tested. Election refers to a process of democratic participation in which all the people express their opinion about personalities and issues by making a mark on a ballot paper. Election expresses democratic class struggle through voting. Major differences in the political allegiances of different age groups, classes, education, religious or ethnic groups have been reported by voting survey. Voting for right or left depends upon a person's life experiences. The study of electoral behavior constitutes a very significant area of

empirical investigation that takes the subjects of politics very close to the discipline of sociology with the result that a new dimension of advanced study, rather a discipline, is becoming more and more popular with the name of political sociology or sociological politics. Man is a rational creature in the philosophical sense of term; he is not so rational in the realms of his economic and political behaviour. An empirical study of the electoral behavior displays the astounding fact that the behavior of man is influenced by several irrational forces. The role of political parties and pressure groups in invoking religious and communal factors, influence of money or charismatic personality of a leader and a host of other irrational forces have their definite influence on the minds of the voters. The role of these irrational forces can be discovered or discerned in case a student of empirical politics focuses his attention on how the favorable results of an election are obtained. This fact applies to every democratic system and, as such, India is no exception. However, keeping the case of Indian voting behavior in view, Prof. V.M. Sirsikar well observes: "An enquiry into the process of election indicates factors other than rationality. It may be said that India has secured a stable government, but the mass manipulation, casteist influences, minority fears, and charismatic hold of the Prime Minister have played no main part in this process."

Voting Behaviour In India: Determinants

The behaviour of voter is influenced by several factors such as religion, caste, community, language, money, policy or ideology, purpose of the polls, extent of franchise, political wave etc. The political parties and groups make use of these variables for the sake of winning the battle of the ballot box. Despite making their professions for enlightened secularism, politicians can be found making appeals to the religious and communal sentiments of the people; they can also be found involved in exploiting the factors of language or money to achieve the purpose of emerging successful in the war of votes. Appeals are issued and canvassing campaigns conducted in the name of a particular policy or ideology for the same purpose. The interest of the voters and accordingly their behaviour at the time of voting is also influenced by the nature or purpose of the elections or the extent of the suffrage. The force of charisma has its own part to play whereby the voters are influenced by a slogan like „Garibi Hatao“, or „A vote for a pair of bullocks is vote for Panditji and progress“, or „Indira means India, India means Indira“, or „Indira means Dictatorship, „My heart beats for India“ versus „Rajiv means Bofors“ and the like. The role of all these factors can be examined in the study of Indian electoral behaviour. There are several factors responsible for voting Behaviour in India. This paper highlighted some determinants of Indian voters. In India

following main political and socio-economic factors which act as determinates of voting behaviours in our Democratic system;

(1) **Charisma:** One important factor of voting behaviour is Charisma. It means exceptional quality of a factor and override group elements leader that becomes a source of attraction and reverence for the people in large numbers; in an opposite sense, it also means a source of awe and terror that frightens the people in large numbers not to speak or dare to do anything against the wishes of the mighty leader. Fortunately, in our country, the constructive aspect of charisma has had its role at the time of election. Huge attendance at the meetings addressed by towering personalities like Nehru, Indira, Vajpayee, Modi and a sudden change in the mind of the voters in response to the appeals issued by such great figures may be counted as the concrete evidences of the role of charisma in the electoral behaviour of our people. The slogan of „Garibi Hatao“ worked miracles in the election of 1971; the personality of Mrs. Gandhi after India’s miraculous victory in the Bangladesh War had the same marvelous impact on the mind of the electorate in the State Assembly elections of 1972. The image of Jayaprakash Narayan had the same effect in the elections of 1977. So was the effect of the personality of Rajiv Gandhi in the elections of 1984 and of V.P. Singh in the elections of 1989. Personality of Modi, BJP won election of 2014. That is Why, it is said: “Where the groups factors are weak or cancel out, this charisma may be the major.”

2. Caste : Caste continues to be a determinant of voting behaviours in India. It has deep roots in the society and constitutes an important basis of social relations at all levels. Despite the adoption of several provisions which prohibit action and discrimination on its basis, caste continues to be a determinant of political behaviours. Politicisation of caste and casteism in politics has been a well known reality of the Indian political system. The political parties in India, without any exception, while formulating their policies, programmes and election strategies always keep in mind the caste factor . Caste is a factor in the selection of candidates for contesting an election from a constituency. Votes are demanded in the name of caste . Jat Ki Vot Jat Ko, Brahmin votes vs. Jat votes or Jat votes vs Ahir votes etc., are commonly used „principles“ for planning an election strategy. The role of caste as a determinant of voting behaviour has been analysed by several scholars and they have come out with the conclusion, as Morris Jones writes, „Politics is more important to caste and caste is more important to politics than before.“ Caste is the main language of voters belonging to rural India. Despite the adoption of democratic values which conceive of a society free from casteism, caste continues to characterise politics in India. Indeed it has become one of the

chief means by which the Indian masses have been attached to the process of democratic politics. The decision to implement Mandal Commission recommendation for reservation of jobs for other Backward Classes (castes) and the reaction it generated in politics testifies to the continued presence of caste as a determinant of politics in India. However, it must be stated that the role of caste as determinant of the voting behaviour has been undergoing a change, at least in the urban areas. Issue based political struggle is gradually taking its shape in the Indian polity. But the situation continues to be paradoxical.

3. Religion : The establishment of a secular state in India – by guaranteeing right to freedom of religion to every one, treating every religion equal and non – recognition of any religion as a state religion – has not been successful in preventing the role of religion as determinant of political behaviour in general and voting behaviour in particular. The existence of such political parties and neo-political groups as stand linked with a particular religion, for example, Muslim League, Akali Dal, Hindu Maha Sabha, Shiv sena etc., have been one of the reasons behind the continued role of religion as a determinant of voting behaviour. Religious pluralism of the Indian society is a major feature of the environment of Indian political system and it greatly influences the struggle for power among political parties. The selection of candidates is done with an eye upon the presence of a religious majority in a particular constituency. The candidates do not hesitate to seek votes by playing the religious card with co-religious voters and the secular card with members of others religious communities. Use of religious places for political ends is also a standard practice, particularly during elections. The religionisation of social-political issues is again resorted to by political parties and other groups. The voters very often vote on religious considerations.

4. Language : India is a multi-lingual state. Linguism also serves as factor in voting behaviour. The organization of states on linguistic basis fully reflects the importance of language as a factor of politics in India. There have been problems in states like that of status of one particular language in that state, or relating to the quality of the status of a language of a state. Since people have emotional attachment with their languages, they easily get influenced whenever there comes up any issue relating to language. Linguistic interests always influence voting behaviour.

5. Money Factor : India is a poor country with a large number of people living below poverty line. Money as such plays a vital role in determining voting behaviour of the people in India. A rich candidate or party has always better chances of winning the elections. But it is to be pointed out here that it happens

only in normal circumstances and not during a wave –election or when other key issues are involved. Despite organizing a very expensive election campaign, the Congress(I) lost power in 1989.

6.Sub-Nationalism : Ethnic pluralism, communalism, regionalism and sub-nationalism are the hard realities of Indian society. Of late sub-nationalism has become a crucial factor in influencing the voting behaviour of the people. At times a secessionist group gives a call for the boycott of elections and uses pressure tactics to force the voters either not to vote in favour of a particular party. Some regional political parties like some fractions of the Akali Dal, Naga Nationalist Organization, Gorkha League, Jharkha party, AASU and AAGSP in Assam have raised parochial slogans from time to time and have disturbed the emotional stability of the people of their states. Such actions of some political parties have at times influenced some people to organize themselves on narrow and parochial lines.

7.Performance of the Party in Power : Each Political party contests elections on the basis of an election manifesto, and after coming into power, it is expected to fulfil the promises made there in. Good or bad performance of the ruling party, just on the basis of the election promises made and promises actually fulfilled influence the basis behavior of the people in a big way. We experienced it in 1989 in India, when the Congress (I), which got a thumping majority in 1984 election could not win even a simple majority in the very next election held in 1989 mainly because of its failure to perform successfully. In 1989, the Congress Party and in 1991 the Janata Dal failed to win because of their failures to exercise power and maintain their political stabilities. This has happened mainly because of a corresponding increase in the number of „floating voter“ or „switchers“ who are mostly young men and women from educated upper middle class, and are ready to shift their support from one party to another on the basis of their performance.

8. Mass literacy : Mass literacy has been another factor of voting behaviours in India. It is because of this weakness of the people that political parties, communal groups and militant outfits, are in a position to exploit the sentiments of the people in the name of caste, religion, region and other such factor. The votes of the illiterate constitute a big proportion of the votes polled and hence it plays a big role in determining the outcomes of elections. However, despite this feature, the common sense and maturity born out of experience of the past has also been playing a big role in influence the voters mind and actions. In 1977 they united to

defeat the forces authoritarianism and 1980, they again to defeat the this united non performers.

9. Factionalism : The Indian Political life, from the village level to the national level, is characterized by factionalism. No political party, nor even the cadre based BJP and the two communist parties is free from factionalism. It is at work, as Rajani Kothari points out, at all level of the congress. It has adversely affected the strength of the congress is a political party with glorious past, a weak present and not a bright future. Other parties are also suffering from factionalism. The voters are getting disenchanted with some of the political parties because of their inability to overcome factionalism. They are turning to locally organized parties or regional parties which, because of their small organizational network and limited operational based are relatively less affected by factionalism.

10. Public Esteem of the Candidate : A candidate report with the people with constituency or his known qualities or contribution in any value spread of activity always acts as a factor of voting behavior. Apart from his parties loyalty or opinion on various issue and problem, a voter while making his choice always takes into account the nature and level of his association with the candidate. A positive image of a party's candidate is a source of popular support for the party. A voter prefers to vote for a candidate who is approachable and who can help him anyway.

11. Election campaigns; Each party launches a vigorous election campaign for influencing the voters in its favour. Use of such means as mass meetings, street meetings, personal contacts, posters, poster war, speeches by film stars, TV and Radio broadcasts, newspaper advertisement, hand bills, processions and propaganda, is made to win votes, particularly the floating votes. Election Campaign is designed to make a voter believe that his interest can be best served by the party, the candidate of the party contesting from his constituency. Poll eve campaigning plays a role in influencing the choice of the voters. A party which is in a position to create an impression through its election campaign that it has a chance to win, can earn some additional votes as several voters try to side with the side which they perceive to be a winning side.

Conclusion

These are thus the important determinants of voting behavior in India. The continuity in the operation of India's political system as a developing democratic political system is gradually training the Indian voters. The process of emergence of an issue based political struggle in place of a caste or religion or personality dominated struggle for power is very slowly but gradually taking shape. Elections occupy a prominent place in the democratic government . It is a means through which people express and enforce their political opinion and regulate political organization of the society. However the behaviour of a voter is influence by several factors such as religion, caste, community, language, money, policy or ideology, purpose of the polls, extent of franchise and the like political parties and groups make use of these variables for the sake of winning the battle of the ballot box. It is therefore, imperative that the use of these determinants should be avoided and elections should be conducted in a very free and fair manner. It also depends upon whether the system allows freedom of thought, expression and association to the people. Mere presence of an electoral system does not make a political system democratic. The will of people is expressed through voting in elections and therefore, all undemocratic and unfair means like manipulating and rigging need to be avoided in the elections. No such action is taken which would in any way undermine the popular will expressed through elections.

