

Electoral Crossroads: Divergent Trends in State and Parliamentary Elections of Nagaland (1967-2024)

Everkali W. Achumi

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Nagaland University

Abstract

This paper offers a longitudinal and comparative analysis of State Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Nagaland from 1964 to 2024, with a focus on voter turnout differentials, issue salience, party dominance, and candidate profile dynamics. Drawing from official statistical reports and employing a paired-sample t-test on matched electoral cycles, the study confirms that State Assembly elections consistently record significantly higher turnout, challenging conventional applications of Second-Order Election Theory. The contrasting success patterns of regional and national parties, alongside differentiated candidate selection strategies, underscore a dual logic of democratic engagement wherein voters realign priorities based on the stakes and scale of representation. The findings contribute to subnational electoral theory and offer implications for political strategy in ethnoregional democracies.

Keywords: Nagaland, Elections, Voter Turnout, Political Parties

INTRODUCTION

Nagaland, the Sixteenth state of India, was carved out of Assam on 1st December, 1963. At present, the state consists of sixteen districts. The state has 144 sub divisions, 26 towns and 1428 villages as per 2011 census report (Chief Electoral Officer, Nagaland, 2023). As per the 2025 Electoral Roll, Nagaland has approximately 1.3 million registered voters (Chief Electoral Officer, Nagaland, 2025). Despite its small size, Nagaland has consistently recorded a high voter turnout trend in both the state and national election polls. This voter turnout stems from deep-rooted tribal identities and traditional village authorities that mobilize voters at the grassroots.

Comparative study of Nagaland's state legislative and parliamentary elections offers a rare vantage point on how local salience and national imperatives interact. In most federations, political scientists expect subnational contests to attract lower turnout and greater protest voting- a notion formalized in Second-Order Election Theory (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Nagaland repeatedly inverts this pattern: Assembly polls often match or exceed Lok Sabha turnout, and regional parties dominate state contests while national parties fare better in the lone parliamentary seat. 'The state-specific nature of Indian politics is that voters make decisions based on the performance of their state government' (Chhibber, 2009). It is particularly pronounced in the context of Nagaland, wherein national elections are shaped by state-level political dynamics, alliances and government performance rather than the other way around. Voters are more intimately connected to their state governments than to the central government. State-level issues such as infrastructure, employment, tribal autonomy, and peace negotiations often dominate public discourse and

influence voting behavior even in national elections. Voters assess national party candidates based on their alignment with or opposition to the ruling state government's performance.

Statistical and Contextual Methodology for Turnout Comparison

This paper analyses official election data from 1964 to 2024 (both State Assembly and Lok Sabha elections) to chart turnout trends and salient issues across Assembly and Lok Sabha polls.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive electoral analysis with inferential statistics to examine voter behavior in Nagaland across state and national elections. The primary dataset comprises official turnout records from the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Chief Electoral Officer, Nagaland, covering all Assembly elections from 1964 to 2023 and all Lok Sabha elections from 1967 to 2024. The 1967 Lok Sabha election³, which was uncontested, and the 1998 Assembly election⁴, which was widely boycotted, are excluded from the statistical test to preserve analytical validity. Additionally, the 2024 Lok Sabha election was excluded because six districts of Eastern Nagaland did not participate, significantly affecting turnout and rendering it incomparable to other years⁴.

To test the hypothesis that Nagaland's electorate demonstrates greater engagement in state elections than in national ones, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. This statistical method compares two related samples; turnout percentages from Assembly and Lok Sabha elections held in proximate years, allowing to assess whether the observed differences are significant statistically.

The test was run on 12 matched election pairs (1969–2023 Assembly vs. 1971–2019 Lok Sabha), excluding the anomalous years. The results reveal a consistent pattern: State Assembly elections recorded a higher mean turnout ($M = 84.14\%$, $SD = 6.15\%$) than Lok Sabha elections ($M = 77.88\%$, $SD = 13.58\%$). The mean difference of 9.25 percentage points was statistically significant, $t(11) = 2.98$, $p = .006$ (one-tailed). This confirms that the difference in turnout is not due to random variation but reflects a systematic preference for state-level participation.

The Making of the Electoral Landscape

The pre-electoral period in the Naga Hills remains vividly etched in memory, as formal democratic processes arrived relatively late in the region. Perceiving the Indian state as an invading and colonizing force, the Naga National Council (NNC)¹ mounted a strong resistance to integration into postcolonial India. Beginning in the mid-1950s, this resistance took the form of organized rebellion and political defiance, most notably through the successful boycott of India's first general elections in 1952 and again in 1957 (Wouters, 2018).

Prior to Nagaland's attainment of statehood, the Naga leaders regarded party politics with deep scepticism, fearing it would fracture societal cohesion, but today the state boasts one of India's highest voter turnouts. Following statehood on December 1, 1963, Nagaland held its inaugural State Assembly election in 1964 (Amer, 2014), and joined India's national electoral process by contesting the 1967 Indian general election for the Lok Sabha, fielding its sole parliamentary candidate and electing S. C. Jamir unopposed to the 4th Lok Sabha (Election Commission of India, 1968).

Figure 1. Nagaland in 1964 with Two Election Districts- Kohima and Mokokchung. (Source: CEO, Nagaland).

Note: These districts were part of the larger Naga Hills Tuensang Area, which had been carved out of Assam and the North-East Frontier Agency before Nagaland attained statehood on December 1, 1963.

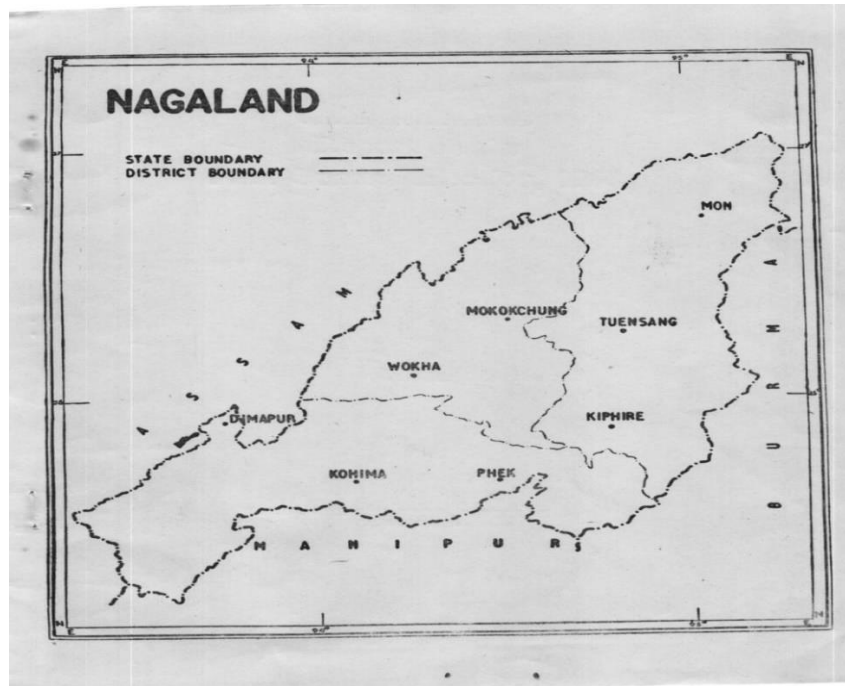


Figure 2. Nagaland in 2025 with Sixteen Election Districts. (Source: CEO, Nagaland).

Note: Nagaland has 17 administrative districts as of 2024, but Meluri district does not have a separate election office yet. It will be counted as a separate election district from 2028.



In 1964, when Nagaland had its first State Legislative Assembly elections, the state had only two election districts- Kohima and Mokokchung and special provisions were made for Tuensang (see Figure 1). As of 2025, Nagaland has sixteen election districts, aligned with the administrative districts (see Figure 2). This expansion mirrors Nagaland’s broader political evolution from a region sceptical of Indian democracy to one of the highest voter turnout states in the country. The transformation is not just

administrative; it is symbolic of deepening democratic participation and institutional consolidation in a once-contested frontier.

The Nagaland Legislative Assembly comprises of Sixty constituencies, each constituency represents a relatively small and localized electorate, while the Lok Sabha has only one seat for the entire state (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, 2025). Nagaland has consistently recorded a high voter turnout trend in both the state and national election polls (See Figure 3 & 4).

However, comparatively the State Assembly elections tend to do better in terms of voter turnouts. One of the most compelling institutional reasons for higher voter turnout in Nagaland’s State Assembly elections is the disparity in representational scale between the two electoral arenas. In State Assembly elections, with Sixty seats at stake, voters feel their participation can meaningfully impact the composition of the state government. It fosters a sense of direct accountability, as MLAs are more likely to be known personally or tribally affiliated with the electorate, whereas in Lok Sabha elections, the outcome hinges on a single winner-takes-all seat, which may feel more symbolic than practical.

Jelle J.P. Wouters characterizes the lone Lok Sabha seat as ‘a seat of little consequence’. While the allocation of a single seat may be justified by the state’s relatively small population and geographic size, it also reinforces a pervasive local sentiment; that any Member of Parliament from Nagaland holds minimal power or influence in Delhi. This perception is echoed widely across the state (Wouters, 2022). However, this view overlooks the strategic potential of Nagaland’s MPs, who often operate as key negotiators within coalition frameworks, leverage their position to advocate for peace process advancements, and serve as conduits between tribal aspirations and national policymaking. Their influence may not lie in numbers, but in their ability to broker alliances, articulate regional concerns, and navigate the corridors of power with targeted diplomacy.

Figure 3. VOTERS TURNOUT (1964-2023) NAGALAND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS (Source: CEO, Nagaland)

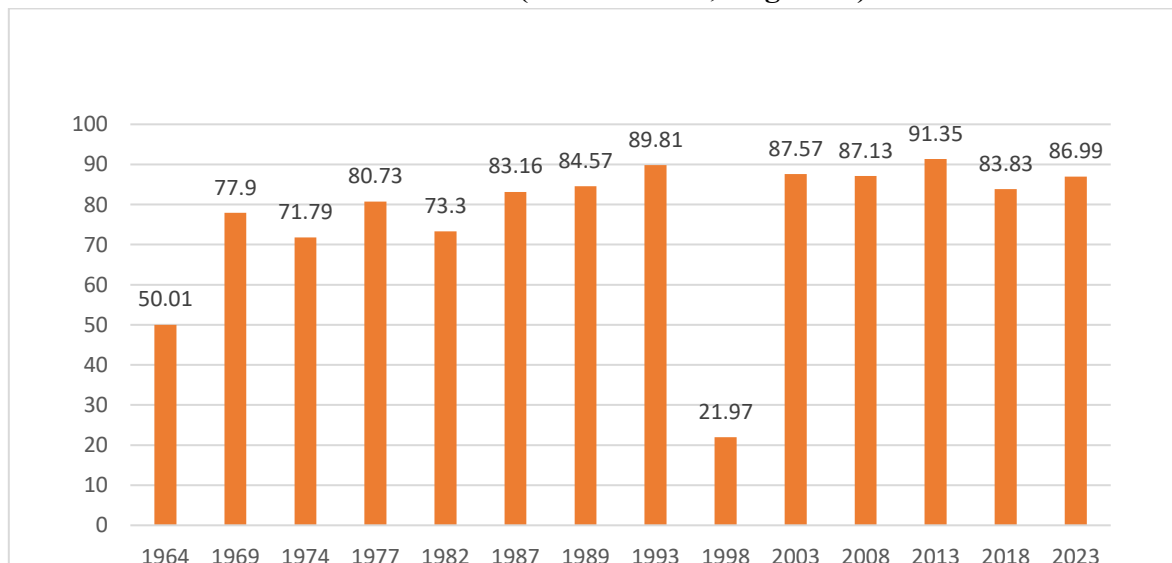
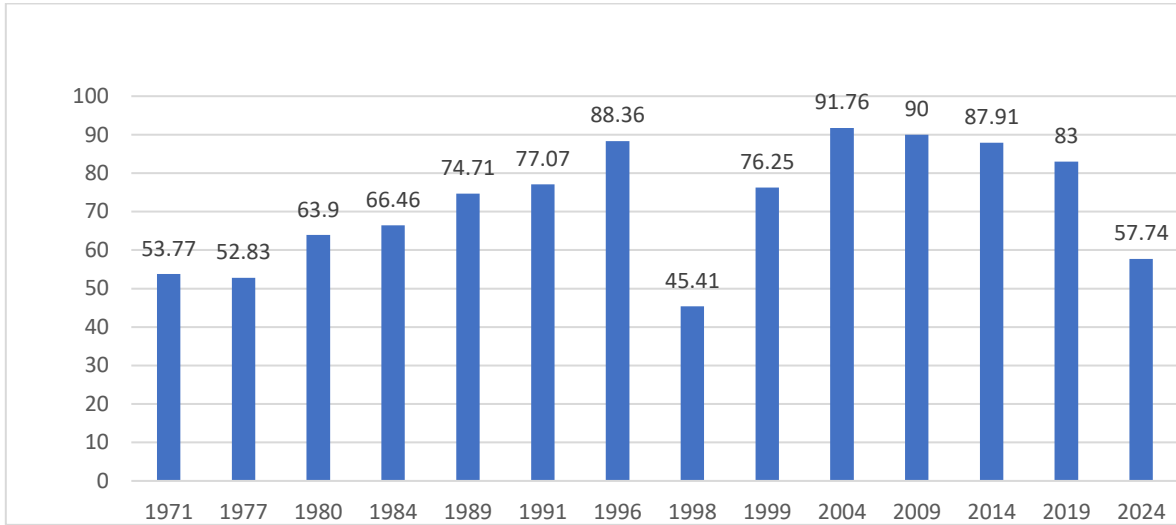


Figure 4. VOTERS TURNOUT (1971-2024) LOK SABHA ELECTIONS (Source: CEO, Nagaland)



Contrasting Party Dominance in Nagaland’s State and Parliamentary Elections

The number of political parties participating in the elections in Nagaland have increased over the years. In Nagaland’s multi-party landscape, electoral authority bifurcates sharply between the state and national levels. Since 1964, regional outfits-most notably the Nagaland Nationalist Organisation (NNO), Naga People’s Front (NPF), and, more recently, the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP)- have captured 9 of 14 Legislative Assembly contests, leveraging tribal affiliations and localized networks to secure grass-roots mobilization (see Figure 5). By contrast, Lok Sabha elections have seen national parties, especially the Indian National Congress (INC), win 6 of 15 parliamentary contests, reflecting broader ideological appeals and alliance politics at the pan-India level (see Figure 6). This divergence underscores how Nagaland’s electorate differentiates between proximal, constituency-based governance where regional parties flourish and singular, symbolic representation in Delhi, where national party structures prevail.

Figure 5. Electoral Dominance of Regional and National Parties in Nagaland Assembly Elections (1964–2023)

Note: Data compiled from official reports of the Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Nagaland (2025).

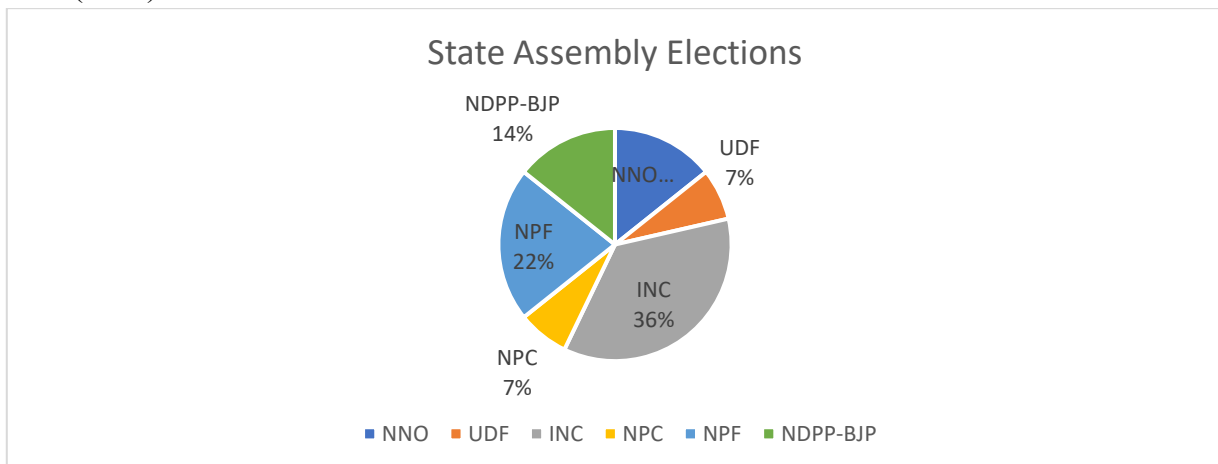
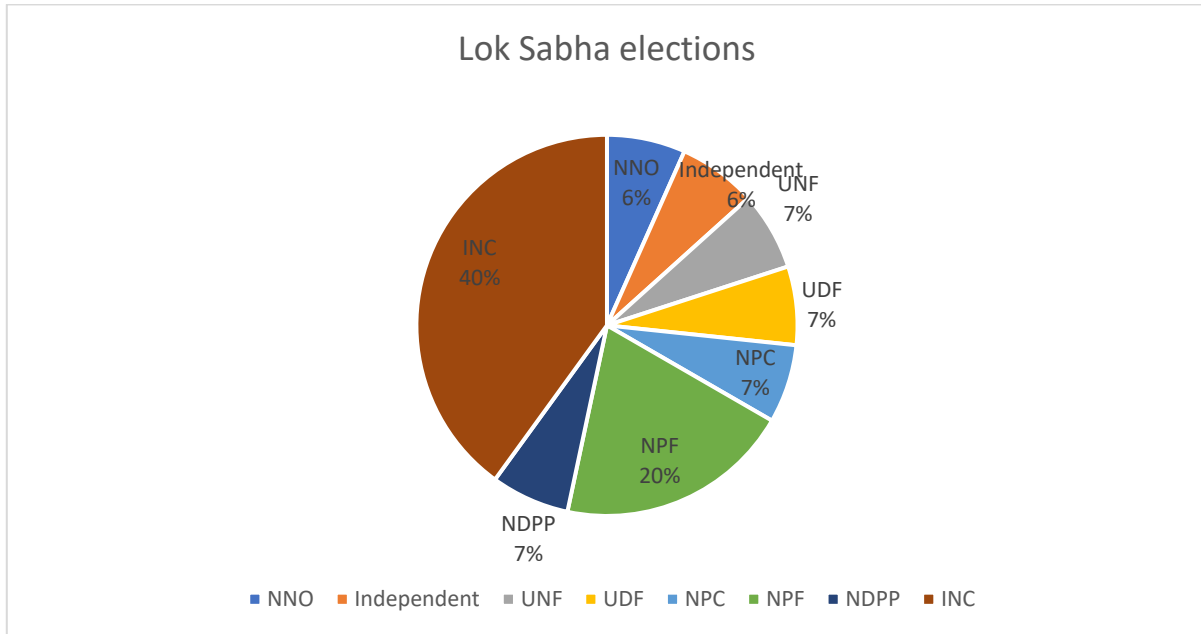


Figure 6. Electoral Dominance of Regional and National Parties in Lok Sabha Elections (1967–2024)

Note: Data compiled from official reports of the Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Nagaland (2025).



Figures 5 and 6 illustrate a clear electoral pattern: regional parties maintain dominance in state-level governance, while national parties remain competitive in Nagaland’s parliamentary contests. In the State Assembly elections, 64 percent of elections were won by regional parties, reflecting their deep tribal roots and local networks. While in the Lok Sabha elections, National parties (mainly INC) captured 40 percent of contests, illustrating stronger national-level appeal though regional outfits still win a slight majority. This finding corroborates the argument that Nagaland’s electorate distinguishes between subnational and national arenas.

Another important axis of differentiation between Nagaland’s State Assembly and Lok Sabha elections lies in the profile of contesting candidates, shaped by contrasting electoral scopes and representational expectations. In State Assembly elections, candidates typically emerge from local communities, often aligned with specific tribal groups or customary institutions. A striking feature of the 2023 contest was a pronounced wave of anti-incumbency, culminating in the election of Twenty-two first-time candidates, accounting for 36.66 percent of the total seats won. This influx of new faces underscores a growing appetite for political renewal and suggests that localized dissatisfaction rather than party allegiance, may be driving electoral outcomes in certain constituencies. Campaign styles in Assembly elections tend to be relational and community-driven, relying on door-to-door outreach, communal endorsement, and tribal legitimacy, in contrast to the media-centric visibility observed in national contests.

In contrast, the Lok Sabha election candidates are typically senior party figures; ex-legislators, state party presidents, or ministerial veterans tasked with representing Nagaland as a unified entity. Their campaigns are shaped by broad-based messaging, statewide rallies, and national coalition narratives. Despite their stature, Lok Sabha aspirants must balance the competing interests of Nagaland’s diverse tribal electorates without the granular constituency linkage that Assembly candidates enjoy.

Electoral Salience Reversed: State Assembly as First-Order Contests in Nagaland

The traditional Second Order Election Theory proposed by Reif and Schmitt (1980), argues that ‘first order’ elections are the national parliamentary elections and attract higher voter turnout, while the ‘second order’ elections refers to the subnational elections; state, local or regional elections, with lower turnout and considered to be less important than first order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

In India’s parliamentary framework, the Second Order Election Theory predicts a higher turnout at the national (Lok Sabha) level as the first order, and a lower turnout at the state level as the second order. However, the case of Nagaland ‘inverts’ this classical Second-Order Election Theory by treating state legislative elections as more consequential than national polls. Nachmias, Rosenthal and Zubida (2012), argued that this Second Order Election Theory model could be inverted when the voters who are alienated from national institutions and are effectively mobilized by their socio-ethnic groups, which have high stakes in second-order institutions, tend to invert their preference with regard to the significance of elections². In such instances, national elections become second-order elections, and local elections become first-order elections (Nachmias et al., 2012). Nagaland exhibits all the conditions for this inversion; many voters feel disconnected from Delhi-centric policymaking, especially in tribal and insurgency-affected regions. They feel alienated from the national politics. The sixty seat Assembly offers granular representation; each MLA answers directly to small tribal constituencies, whereas the lone parliamentary seat aggregates diverse groups, diluting local stakes. State polls in the 2023 Assembly election saw high engagement around infrastructure development, youth employment, and the Naga political solution, which resonated more deeply with the electorate than broader national themes of security or economic policy. The electoral politics in Nagaland is deeply rooted in traditional village councils and tribal affiliations. Voters are more likely to participate in state elections where their tribal identity and customary laws are directly represented (Achanger, 2022). Assembly elections function as first-order contests, while Lok Sabha elections are treated as second-order.

Discussion

These findings reinforce the central argument of this paper: that Nagaland’s electorate assigns greater salience to state elections than to national ones. This divergence from Second-Order Election Theory suggests that in ethnically distinct and politically mobilized regions like Nagaland, subnational elections are not secondary but primary arenas of democratic expression. The statistical evidence complements the qualitative insights drawn from party competition, candidate profile differentiation and historical context, offering a well-grounded explanation for the state’s unique electoral behavior. Traditionally, national elections are expected to command higher turnout and salience, while state elections are seen as less consequential.

However, Nagaland flips this model. The paired-sample t-test shows significantly higher turnout in Assembly elections than Lok Sabha election. This challenges the universality of Reif & Schmitt’s model and aligns with Nachmias et al.’s argument that alienation from national institutions and strong local mobilization can reverse electoral hierarchies. The findings have practical consequences for party strategy where regional parties must continue leveraging tribal legitimacy and local networks for Assembly contests. National parties must rethink their Lok Sabha approach, not just through alliances, but by embedding local concerns into national platforms. Candidate selection, messaging, and alliance-building must be context-sensitive, reflecting the representational scale and voter priorities.

This inversion is not merely statistical- it reflects a recalibration of political meaning, where voters

perceive state elections as the true arena for agency, accountability, and representation.

Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of Nagaland's State Assembly and Lok Sabha elections from 1964 to 2024, employing paired-sample t-tests on turnout data and drawing on official statistical reports (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Nagaland; Election Commission of India). The findings confirm that Assembly elections in Nagaland operate as first-order contests consistently attracting higher turnout, deeper issue salience, and stronger regional party dominance thereby inverting the expectations of Second-Order Election Theory. Assembly elections elicit consistent higher voter turnout, more localized issue engagement, and dominant performances from regional parties whose legitimacy is rooted in tribal and customary structures. In contrast, parliamentary elections, despite carrying pan-state significance, suffer from diminished participatory enthusiasm, symbolic representation, and national party influence. This divergence reflects a context-driven retuning of voter priorities, wherein identity politics, service delivery, and autonomy aspirations are prioritized over broad national ideologies. By demonstrating that subnational contests can eclipse national ones in turnout and mobilization, this case refines our understanding of electoral order in ethnoregional contexts. The calibration of candidate profiles and alliance strategies depicts local, community-rooted figures for Assembly polls versus senior, nationally recognized leaders for Lok Sabha contests. It illuminates a two-tiered logic of voter expectation and party strategy. This nuance encourages scholars to incorporate representational scale and institutional proximity into models of voter behavior.

However, Nagaland's lone Lok Sabha constituency limits the generalizability of findings to other federal units with multiple seats, where vote dispersion and local strongholds may produce different dynamics. Comparative studies with multi-seat states could test whether similar inversions occur.

The analysis depends primarily on turnout statistics and electoral outcomes; it lacks micro-level survey data on individual voter motivations, which could reveal the cognitive processes behind party and candidate choice. By situating Nagaland's electoral phenomena within broader theoretical debates and acknowledging empirical constraints, this study lays the groundwork for a richer, multi-dimensional understanding of how institutional scale and cultural context shape democratic engagement.

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