

Trends of Political Participation in India: Changing Pattern with Respect to Time and Gender

Manali Singh¹, Prof. Dr. Rajshree Chaturvedi²

¹Ph.D. Research scholar, Department of political science, Chaudhary charan singh university, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Department of political science, Chaudhary charan singh university, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract:

Effective political participation is an indicator of healthy democracy. In india, voting is a primary means of political participation. It allows representation of all citizens. The voting pattern since independence has seen some shifts, but post 1989, shifts have been significant. Male and female have never contributed equally with respect to their gender population, as the male participation has always been more than female participation. But lately some significant changes in this pattern have been witnessed. The study aims to focus on these trends with respect to time and gender.

Keywords: political participation, voter's turnout, voting, trends, democracy, female participation

INTRODUCTION

India has seen a history of struggles to achieve the right of universal adult suffrage from the clutches of british colonialism. India has witnessed tremendous changes since independence, not just in its politics but also in the mindset of citizens. The journey witnessed changes in the social, economic, political, environmental and many other fields. In this process of change some new trends are emerging in indian politics. The journey began as a congress system, further saw a long journey of coalition politics. The changing pattern of dominance of political parties also play a big role in this. The rise of regional parties has brought ground level inclusion in the political representation of democracy in india. The rise of globalisation and cosmopolitanism has blurred the boundaries of cultures too, the stereotypical and biased prejudices of Indian society have also been impacted heavily. The ratio of female participation in india has not only increased in respect to participation as a candidate, but also as participation as voters. The representation of women in electoral representation matter for many significant reasons. This signifies that women play an important role in choosing the ruling government. But behind the veil of data lies realities which cannot be measured quantitatively. Just like the prevalence of 'sarpanch pati', there also may exist a concept of 'voter pati'. But to find if the vote casted by women is her free choice or is it a result of interpellation and persuasion. The patterns of political participation has varied significantly in the last few years. This change is witnessed in terms of gender too.

IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Dr B.R. Ambedkar always said, it is the people who give shape to the constitution. After all, any book of rules has no significance unless authority is legitimate. The concept of legitimacy as given by *Max weber* explains how power, if loses authority turns into illegitimate power. So, the authority is utmost needed to sustain a democracy. Authority derives its base in the participation of masses. When this participation is gender and age inclusive, the real representation is upheld. No definition is universally accepted as different scholars define political representation in different perspectives.

Political participation can be defined as those actions of citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government decision-making (**Parasuraman, 2009**). Political participation means the involvement of individuals or groups in decision-making processes, especially activities affecting politics, and it includes action by private citizens intended to influence government actions and decisions (**Sylke Nissen**). Political participation is essential because it creates active citizens and sustains democratic life. People should not remain passive; instead, they should take part in public affairs through associations, local self-government, and civic action (**Alexis de Tocqueville**). According to **S. E. Verba**, political participation is important because it gives citizens a way to influence government and improve democracy. His work treats participation as a core democratic value since it connects ordinary people to decision-making and representation. According to **Elena García Gutián**, voting is the basic form of participation, but demonstrations, civil society action, and other collective activities are also vital for a real democracy. Even organizing a demonstration, protesting and even rioting are other forms of participation (**Thanikodi and Sugirtha, 2007**).

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AT INDEPENDENCE

The Indian Councils Act of 1861 provided for representation to Indians through nomination to the Viceroy's council, but there were no elections. Later, The Indian Councils Act of 1892 introduced indirect elections for legislative councils, but still the voting rights were limited to propertied and elite section of society. Then, the 1909 reforms introduced separate electorates for Muslims. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms introduced dyarchy in provinces, with increased Indian representation. This reform allowed a broader segment of the population to vote, but still, suffrage was limited to the elite privileged section of society. It was through the Government of India Act of 1935 that a significant step was taken towards broader enfranchisement, expanding the electorate to about 30 million people, including a limited number of women. Despite this expansion, voting rights were still restricted to individuals who met specific criteria of property.

EVOLUTION OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

First phase: 1947-52

In this phase, a lot of transformation was happening. As India recently witnessed independence, many things had to be settled. Biggest step was the establishment of Election commission of India as an autonomous constitutional body in 1950. The first general elections took place in 1951 and 1952 on 489 seats in the lok sabha. This was a historical remark as India became the first country of this size and population, to witness a democratic and fair elections.

Second phase : 1952-66

These elections tested the strength of the

electoral machinery and the ability of the ECI to conduct elections in a newly independent and diverse country. The commission also did extensive voter education campaigns, addressing the high levels of illiteracy and lack of electoral awareness among the population.

Third phase - 1966-77

The period of Indira Gandhi's leadership. During this time, legislative amendments to the Representation of the People act were made to tighten regulations around electoral practices, campaign financing, and candidate eligibility. The 39th and 42nd constitutional amendments made significantly changed the federal structure of the country. Too many changes in the parts of constitution (which later came to be known as the basic structure of constitution), also impacted the voting behaviour.

Fourth phase - 1977-80

This was the time after emergency, requiring extra efforts to restore faith in democratic norms. The 44th amendment decentralised power and ascertained faith in democratic electoral process.

Fifth phase - 1980-96

The 52nd Amendment to the Constitution introduced the Anti-Defection Law (1985), aimed to curb political defections and ensuring stability in the government. The 61st Amendment Act lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 years, significantly expanding the electorate and enabling greater youth participation in the democratic process.

Sixth phase - 1998-2004

There were technological advancements, legislative reforms, and the growing complexity of the political landscape. The extensive use of EVM began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. By the 2004 general elections, EVMs were used across the entire country. Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2002 made it mandatory for candidates to disclose their criminal records, financial assets, and educational qualifications when filing their nomination papers. The Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) program was launched to educate and motivate citizens to participate in the electoral process. It aimed to address issues like voter apathy, especially among urban and educated sections, and improve overall voter turnout (Khushboo, 2024).

Seventh phase - 2004-14

ECI began piloting the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) system in 2013. The VVPAT system allowed voters to verify their vote by providing a paper receipt, enhancing the transparency and trustworthiness of the electronic voting process. The ECI launched the Electoral Roll Purification and National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP) in 2015, aimed at eliminating duplicate and bogus entries in the electoral roll. NRIs were now eligible to be registered in the electoral rolls and vote in their respective constituencies, ensuring that the diaspora had a voice in the democratic process (Khushboo, 2024).

Eighth phase - 2014 to present

The ECI began exploring the use of blockchain technology to enable remote voting for migrant workers and non-resident Indians (NRIs). The introduction of electoral bonds aimed at increasing transparency in political funding.

But they were soon discontinued. Social media has made a huge difference in this era, as the formation of Eco chambers have heavily influenced the election outcomes.

CHANGES IN VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Since independence, the lok sabha elections in india have served as the most important part of democratic participation in the country. The history of indian elections witnessed the expansion of universal adult franchise, transformation from Congress system to coalition system. The history also reflects the gradual transformation of voter behaviour, political awareness, and patterns of electoral competition.

In the early decades of independence, voting was shaped largely by the dominance of a single party system, while later decades witnessed increasing political fragmentation, the rise of regional forces, identity-based mobilization, and a more assertive electorate and coalition politics.

The changing trend of voters also lay ground in the rising influence of media, social media, changing demands of evolving society. With that, the change in pattern of women participation both as candidate and voter has highly been impacted. Over time, Indian elections have moved from a phase of limited political competition to one of intense multi-party playground, where voters are more informed. As per our constitutional collective resolution, the first Lok Sabha General Elections took place in 1952, and since then, Indian electoral politics has experienced continuity and change in the form of various issues, trends, and verdicts (kuldeep dhanotar, 2014).

Indian voting behavior has shifted from early elite- and identity-led patterns to a more complex mix of caste, class, region, welfare, media, and voter pragmatism (Drishti sah).

EVOLUTION OF VOTER TURNOUT

The data represented in table 1 clearly shows that in the 1989 general elections, the voter turnout of male was significantly higher than females, roughly 8.81% higher. The next general elections of 1991 saw a major decline in the participation both in terms of male and female participation. Amongst them, the decline in the male voter's turnout decreased by 4.55%, whereas there was more decline amongst female (5.97%). This signifies that when the overall voter turnout fell, women turnout fell more significantly. Later in 1996 general elections, a slight increase was seen in both male and female voter turnout. Where the male participation was 62.06% and female turnout was 53.41%, increase of 0.48% and 2.06% in men and women respectively. This shows that when the voters turnout increases, the women's percentage increased slightly more.

There was a continuous increase in the participation turnout of both men and women, significantly of 3.66% amongst men and 4.47% amongst women. These elections of the year 1998 emerged out to be the

second consecutive year to witness increase in voters' turnout. While the male political participation in terms of percentage was 65.72%, the female participation was 57.88%.

Table 1: political participation (in terms of voting percentage) of male and female in Lok Sabha general elections of India

year	Male (in terms of percentage)	Female (in terms of percentage)
1989	66.13	57.32
1991	61.58	51.35
1996	62.06	53.41
1998	65.72	57.88
1999	63.97	55.64
2004	61.66	53.30
2009	60.24	55.82
2014	67.09	65.30
2019	67.11	66.71
2024	65.55	66.71

Source: Election commission of India

Due to the sudden fall of government in less than a year, the 1999 elections witnessed a slight decrease in voters' participation. The male participation fell by 1.75% and female participation fell by 2.24%. The 2004 general elections also witnessed a dip of 2.31% and 2.34% in male and female respectively. The 2009 general elections political participation displays a contradictory picture, such which was not seen earlier. In this year, there was a decline of 1.42% in male participation whereas there was an increase of 2.52% in female participation. This poses a paradoxical situation of overall voters' turnout. it was in 2014 that the electoral results saw a very different picture. the male political participation in terms of voting percentage grew to 67.09% from 60.24% in 2009, that is a 6.85% increase. the most significant increase in male participation since independence. in terms of female also, there was a significant increase from 55.82% in 2009 to 65.30% in 2014. This was a significant increase of 9.48%. this tremendous increase in the female participation poses a different picture in the history of India's voter turnout.

this increase remained stagnant in the next general elections of 2019. there was not any significant increase in the data in this year. The political participation of male in terms of voting percentage was 67.11% and for female it was 66.71%. in 2024, the male voters' participation was 65.55% and females' was 65.78.

This above data majorly reflects that women participation has not been steadily increasing in the general elections. There is a roller coaster which has seen significant ups and downs. But this variation is not much beyond the political participation of male. The changes in this pattern has its reasons in the ongoing events in the country. Such as the political instability during 1996-1999, there was significant rise and fall in the voters' participation. The recent protest by gen-z for the cause of NEET paper leak, has given air to a different fire in the hearts of youngsters. This protest apart from male, witnessed huge

participation of females and transgenders. This scale of youth engagement and activeness can lead to a major change in political participation pattern of India

STATE VS NATIONAL TREND

The average voter turnout in state elections exceeded that of the national elections by over 10% in the 2008–2012 election cycle, with states like Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu consistently recording higher turnout rates in their state elections compared to the Lok Sabha elections (Jain & Prasad, 2018). This divergence can be attributed to the perception that state-level elections have a more direct impact on citizens' daily lives through local governance and policies, whereas national elections may seem more removed from the electorate's immediate concerns (Chatterjee, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The history of electoral participation in India has witnessed immense changes in the electoral process, voting behaviour and gendered voter's turnout. Since independence, each phase of elections has witnessed change in electoral pattern, methods and participation percentage. Though the percentage has changed with respect to the population change. The participation of voters has changed with respect to the major events that took place in the regime of the following government. It is clearly witnessed that in years of unstable government, for example in 1991, 1996, 2004 the voter's turnout also decreased. This signifies that when stability of the government formation is under question, the voter turnout falls. Whereas, in opposite conditions, the voter turnout rises. In context of women participation in voting, it has been seen that whenever the overall voting percentage declined, it was the women's participation which declined the most. Also, whenever overall voting participation increased, there was seen a comparatively higher increase in women's participation. Thus the government policies and actions impact the stability of the government, which in turn directly impacts the overall voter turnout. And the change in overall voter turnout impacts the voter turnout of women significantly more than men. This gendered voting pattern signifies the big role women play in holding the strings of democracy in India.

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