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Punjab's Electoral Politics and Voting Behaviour

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Abstract

This article examines the electoral politics and voting behavior in Punjab, focusing on the social, economic, and institutional factors that shape voters' choices. It argues that Punjab's political landscape has been uniquely shaped by religious identity, regional consciousness, dependence on agriculture, caste and class relations, and a long history of political mobilization. Traditionally dominated by the Indian National Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal, Punjab's politics underwent a significant shift during the 2022 Legislative Assembly elections, when the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) secured an unprecedented victory amidst public discontent regarding unemployment, corruption, drug abuse, the agrarian crisis, and poor governance. This article highlights the political significance of farmers, government employees, contract workers, and Dalit communities, illustrating how organized mobilization and local grievances influence election results. It further analyzes the performance of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in government—covering welfare initiatives such as health insurance, free electricity, and financial assistance for women—while noting persistent concerns regarding agricultural livelihoods, employment, land acquisition, and public safety. The study concludes that voters in Punjab are becoming increasingly pragmatic, politically aware, and demanding of accountable governance. Although the AAP retains an advantage heading into the 2027 elections, no party's position is secure; shifting alliances, candidate selection, local issues, and governance performance could prove decisive in shaping the final electoral outcomes.

Keywords: Punjab electoral politics, voting behavior, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), agrarian crisis, political accountability etc.

Introduction

Indian democracy, which is the world's largest democratic system, derives its strength from the active political participation of its citizens. This participation encompasses everything from casting votes during elections to engaging in policy-making and other matters of public importance. Elections and political parties are of paramount importance in a democratic system of governance, as elections serve as the primary link between citizens and the political system. Furthermore, they provide a means to understand the political interests, preferences, and attitudes of the citizens.

Like other forms of human behavior, voting behavior is also determined by a broader socio-cultural environment (Biswas et al., 2018). The study of voting behavior helps in understanding electoral trends, such as why citizens decide whether or not to vote, and how they arrive at their electoral decisions. However, voting behavior is a complex phenomenon, and it is difficult to precisely measure the

cognitive (mental) and social processes that underlie electoral decisions. Despite Punjab's political significance, the state's electoral politics and voting patterns have received relatively little attention from scholars. A systematic analysis of these trends could contribute to future research on electoral behavior in the state, furthermore, it could prove beneficial for legislators, planners, and administrators involved in formulating civic and development policies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, based on secondary sources such as academic literature, newspaper reports, electoral statistics, and policy documents. It analyzes voting behavior in Punjab, inter-party competition, the mobilization of farmers and government employees, welfare measures, and the evolving political landscape in the lead-up to the 2027 Legislative Assembly elections.

The Uniqueness of Punjab's Politics

The political dynamics of Punjab unfold within a framework that encompasses a journey ranging from clashes between identities to the forging of mutual agreements and alliances. This is neither a linear nor a unidirectional process at times, the situation reverts to conflict, only to subsequently move back toward the formation of alliances. Within this dynamic political landscape of Punjab, identities rooted in religion, nationhood, language, class, and caste have played a significant role.

So Punjab's electoral politics is unique due to its strong regional identity, religious institutions, an agrarian-based economy, and a long history of political mobilization. For a long period following independence the state's electoral politics was dominated by two major parties, the Indian National Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). The Congress presented itself as a secular party, garnering support from various religious and social communities, whereas the Akali Dal primarily drew its support from Sikh farmers and religious institutions. Since the 1990s, political power in Punjab has primarily alternated between the Congress and the Akali Dal, or their respective alliances. However, the 2022 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections marked a significant turning point in the state's post-independence political history when the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) secured an unprecedented electoral victory, reflecting widespread public discontent with the established parties. Voter support for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerged from growing concern over a range of persistent issues—such as drug abuse, the rise of gangs, unemployment, corruption, the agrarian crisis, declining educational standards, and a lack of development. This transformed Punjab’s political landscape, previously defined primarily by a two-way contest, into a three-cornered electoral battle.

Factors Determining Voting Behavior

Employment-related issues have a profound impact on the electoral contest in Punjab. During election campaigns, political parties frequently promise large-scale job creation; these pledges often include commitments to provide employment to lakhs of young people or, at the very least, to ensure one job for every family. Despite such promises, unemployment remains a persistent problem—one that has continued to be a cause for concern across the tenures of various successive governments.

In Punjab, religion, community, and language serve as key bases for political mobilization. Sikh identity, institutions like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), and issues of federal

autonomy have historically shaped Akali politics. The use of religious places and symbols for political mobilization is a well-known feature of the state's electoral landscape.

Caste, class, and local issues further influence voter behavior. Although Dalits constitute more than 30 percent of Punjab's population, political power has historically remained concentrated among the Jat Sikhs. Nevertheless, the political activism of Dalit communities is on the rise, signaling a gradual shift in the state's electoral alliances.

Agrarian Concerns, Employee Mobilisation, and Electoral Change in Punjab

Punjab's economy remains predominantly agrarian, and electoral discourse is frequently shaped by issues such as the minimum support price (MSP), farm indebtedness, water scarcity, and agricultural reforms. The farmers' protests of 2020–21 significantly altered the political landscape in the state and undermined the credibility of several traditional political parties. Consequently, the overwhelming majority secured by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the 2022 Legislative Assembly elections can be viewed as a reflection of voter discontent with the existing political establishment. These elections also highlighted the growing political significance of government employees and contractual workers. Following the formation of the Congress government in 2017, employee unions began staging protests in response to their demands being ignored. Key issues included the implementation of the Sixth and Seventh Pay Commissions, the application of UGC pay scales for college and university teachers, the regularization of contractual employees, and matters concerning pensions. Unions such as the Punjab Federation of University and College Teachers' Organizations (PFUCTO), the Punjab College Teachers' Union, the Punjab Roadways Employees' Union, and various pensioners' associations mobilized against the government, warning that it would face the consequences in the elections. These mobilizations highlight a new dimension in the electoral politics of Punjab (Kumar, 2022). Thus, the 2022 Punjab elections witnessed a confluence of factors: the agrarian crisis, resentment toward the ruling party, dissatisfaction among employees, and a desire for political change. The resounding victory of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was not only a consequence of voter discontent with established political parties but also a reflection of the growing capacity of organized social groups—particularly farmers, government employees, and contractual workers—to influence the electoral narrative.

AAP in Government and Public Expectations

Under the leadership of Bhagwant Singh Mann, AAP criticised the previous Akali-BJP government for its reliance on liquor excise revenue, weaknesses in public education, limited employment opportunities, and related governance failures. The party argued that these conditions had contributed to drug addiction among Punjabi youth and outward migration in search of employment. AAP's campaign emphasised change in education, health, and employment. It promised to free the people of Punjab from their long-standing problems. However, the party's performance in government has been subject to criticism. Its reduced performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, where it won only three of Punjab's thirteen parliamentary seats, has been interpreted as an indication of declining public confidence (The Tribune, 16 March 2026).

Agrarian Crisis and Governance

During the election campaign, the current government made several promises to farmers, many of which remain unfulfilled. The net savings of farmers from the wheat-paddy cropping cycle have reportedly

declined, while input costs and inflation have continued to rise. It has also been argued that urbanization, industrialization, and the diversion of cultivable land for infrastructure and development projects have forced approximately 40 percent of farming households to move away from agriculture.

Agricultural reform requires coordination among various stakeholders: agricultural universities, farmers, and the state. Universities are expected to provide technical knowledge, while the government must ensure affordable access to quality seeds and remunerative procurement prices. Without sustained institutional support, agricultural livelihoods cannot be stabilized. Furthermore, land acquisition for Special Economic Zones (SEZs), industrial corridors, land-pooling schemes, and urban projects has intensified concerns regarding the loss of agricultural land. Persistent reports of farmer suicides, crime, violence, gangsterism, and drug-related deaths have raised questions about the government's performance (Punjabi Tribune, March 19, 2026). Newspaper reports regularly document protests by various sections of society—farmers demanding better prices for their crops, employees seeking timely salary payments and fair dearness allowances, and contractual workers demanding permanent employment.

Welfare Schemes and Electoral Strategy

The state government has implemented several welfare measures, including universal coverage under the 'Chief Minister's Health Insurance Scheme' (Mukhyamantri Sehat Bima Yojana), free electricity, a monthly financial assistance of ₹1,000-1500 for women, and legislation concerning religious sacrilege. These steps can be viewed as part of a broader strategy to sustain political support ahead of the 2027 Legislative Assembly elections.

However, public expectations remain unfulfilled. Consequently, with the 2027 elections in view, Punjab stands at a critical political juncture. The core question is: which party will the voters trust—and on what basis—and to whom will they entrust the reins of power?

The Evolving Political Landscape

Available evidence indicates that the credibility of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has declined since its victory in 2022. Despite winning seven out of Punjab’s thirteen Lok Sabha seats in 2024, the Congress party is grappling with internal factionalism, organizational weaknesses, and questions regarding its long-term political survival. Meanwhile, the Shiromani Akali Dal is beset by various political challenges and issues concerning its credibility. The political space vacated by the Akali Dal has, created opportunities for alternative political forces. The election of Amritpal Singh as a Member of Parliament from Khadoor Sahib can be viewed as a sign of the resurgent importance of 'Panthic' (Sikh-centric) issues in specific regions. On the other hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is facing a lack of trust among voters in Punjab—a situation primarily stemming from the central government's three farm laws and the subsequent farmers' protest against them.

Historically, voters in Punjab have shown a strong trend against the incumbent party. Over the last three decades or so, the ruling governments have frequently changed in successive elections. Socio-economic transformation has heightened political awareness among citizens and facilitated the emergence of educated and dynamic leaders; most of these leaders represent rural constituencies and come from an agricultural background.

Conclusion

The voting behavior of the electorate in Punjab is highly diverse and cannot be explained by a single pattern. Electoral decisions are determined by a variety of interconnected factors, including caste, religion, region, age, education, occupation, locality, the candidate's image, party ideology, socio-economic issues, and the performance of the government.

The emerging political landscape indicates that Punjab's democracy requires more accountable and responsive governance. If the political leadership fails to address the state's structural problems, it risks losing public support. Voters are no longer passive recipients of political promises; they have become active participants in the democratic process.

Punjab's electoral history demonstrates that voters are capable of penalizing parties that fail to meet public expectations. The decline of the Shiromani Akali Dal to just 15 seats in the 2017 Legislative Assembly elections—following the incidents of sacrilege at Bargari and Behbal Kalan—illustrates this capacity for electoral accountability. In this sense, elections in Punjab serve as an important mechanism through which citizens evaluate political promises and hold political leaders accountable.

The political landscape of Punjab has always been dynamic and unpredictable arena, shaped by its rich history, agrarian roots, and complex social fabric. As the state moves toward the 2027 Legislative Assembly elections, signs of restlessness have already begun to emerge among the major political parties—the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Indian National Congress, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The 2027 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections cannot be viewed as a contest with a predetermined outcome. Although the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) currently enjoys a structural advantage, the electoral position of no political party across the state can be considered entirely secure. Minor shifts in vote share, the selection of candidates, alliance dynamics, the effectiveness of election campaigning, and local political factors—all of these can significantly influence the final outcome of a highly competitive election. In Punjab, the political landscape may continue to shift—driven by policy decisions, the formation of alliances, the announcement of candidates, developments during the election campaign, and unforeseen events—right up until the schedule for the Legislative Assembly elections is announced. (Punjab Mood Report 2026)

Voters remain pragmatic, politically aware, and increasingly demanding. They are rewarding tangible governance, while holding individual representatives accountable for their performance within their respective constituencies. The delivery of welfare schemes has strengthened the position of the ruling party; however, issues such as employment, drug abuse, agriculture, and local governance dominate public expectations. Voters in Punjab can still be swayed, which has made the election campaign one of the most significant and fiercely contested in the state's recent political history.

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