

What motivates voters to vote in India?

A case study in Gurugram

Introduction

Voter participation in India has witnessed a positive trend over the last few decades. However, most existing data focuses only on the West, with studies assuming voter literacy. Most, if not all, global studies on voter motivations also only consider voters who have recently turned 18 and gained voting rights. They conveniently ignore the motivations of voters who have had this right for a long time but only just exercised or plan on exercising it in the next elections. This interdisciplinary paper examines the different dimensions of voter motivations, or lack thereof, in India, with particular attention to literacy, age, gender, and socio-economic background.

Using India as a case, this paper moves away from the Western norm by highlighting the political terrain of voting behaviour in a specific global South context. Firstly, it includes the motivations of voters who are not literate; secondly, it includes adults aged 18 and above who are participating in elections for the first time; and thirdly, it is attentive to the particularities of gender and socio-economic circumstance in a non-Western context. Thus, it addresses essential gaps in the literature, drawing from and contributing to the existing body of literature on political science, public policy, gender studies, sociology, Indian politics, voting behaviour, international relations, and South Asian studies.

Methodologically, the paper focuses on voters in Gurugram City in North India. Drawing on empirical data from 70 voters on Golf Course Road, Gurugram, it looks at the aforementioned key factors affecting voter participation. A two-fold approach will help gather this data, where literate voters will fill out a form consisting of relevant questions. Further, for illiterate voters, first-hand in-person interviews will be conducted. Interviewers will ask questions in these voters' native language, Hindi, and the responses will then be translated and transcribed to bridge the language barrier. While Gurugram is the primary geographical source of empirical data for convenience and feasibility, some aspects of the paper can be generalised to India and, by extension, the Global South.

Literature Review

What guides people's decision to vote? This inquiry poses an essential political question since election participation transforms voters' status from 'subject' to 'citizen.' In addressing this crucial question, social psychologists have varying stances. On the one hand, a few scholars like Neuman (2007) focus on the psychological and emotional motives behind voting, providing a comprehensive overview of the intricate and often ignored relationship between emotions and political engagement. Paradoxically, others like Blais, Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan emphasize the crucial role of the rational choice theory; they contend that the most prominent voter motivations include utility maximisation, policy positioning, social preferences, and cost-benefit analysis.

Within the vast array of already existing knowledge on voter motivations, it is evident that a large chunk of the data focuses mainly on the West. Naturally, most such works assume voter literacy, leaving a spectrum of voters unexplored in the Global South and other third-world countries. Thus, we obtain a broad spatial division. However, further sub-diving works based on the West, we obtain a first category that explains voter participation in terms of the rational choice theory.

Primarily, Blais André's "To Vote or Not to Vote? The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory" contributes significantly to the understanding of voter behaviour and electoral politics. Blais (2000) examines the determinants influencing voter turnout at the aggregate, cross-national level, exploring the factors contributing to increased or decreased electoral participation. In this inquiry, the author critically evaluates the applicability of the rational choice model to elucidate the decision-making processes underlying individuals' choices to either cast a vote or abstain from participation. Blais (2000) finds that there has been a notable surge in the prevalence of the rational choice model as an explanatory framework for voter turnout over the past few decades. Concurrently, a growing wave of vocal dissent has emerged, challenging the theoretical tenets of rational choice theory in the realm of voter behaviour.

Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan's "Rational Voting and Voter Turnout" and Feddersen and Sandroni's "A Theory of Participation in Elections" explore how voting can be a rational choice for people who have social preferences, that is, who care about the well-being of others and themselves. These scholars assert that individuals falling into this category are indifferent to the probability of

their vote being decisive (Edlin et al., 2006; Feddersen & Sandroni, 2006). Their anticipated satisfaction from voting remains consistent, given their inclusion of the moral duty to vote within their overall sense of well-being. The authors further contend that ethical voting introduces a feedback mechanism, contributing to stabilizing voter turnout at appropriate levels. Overall, proponents of the rational choice model in the study of voter behaviour argue that this theoretical framework offers valuable insights into how individuals make electoral decisions, particularly in Western democracies.

These scholars significantly differ from the second category of authors, who primarily focus on socio-economic facets and their profound impact on an individual's voter motivations. Unlike advocates of the rational choice model, socio-economic perspectives suggest that factors like race, ethnicity, and economic strata play a crucial role in voters' electoral decisions. They often highlight structural inequalities and systemic factors that impact different demographic groups, potentially influencing their political attitudes and behaviours. For example, Carol Anderson's *One Person, No Vote* (2018) examines the history of brutal race-based vote suppression and critiques its many contemporary iterations, including ID requirements, voter purges, election fraud, and stolen elections. However, these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and several scholars have sought to integrate various factors to understand voter behaviour.

For example, Alexander Schuessler (2000) has combined social theory, ethnography, and rational choice theory to explain why people vote. Social scientists have long been perplexed by the "paradox of participation," or the question of why voters cast ballots when they do not essentially influence election outcomes. Furthermore, rational choice theorists—who like to characterise political action in terms of incentives—have been significantly perturbed by it. The answer by Schuessler (2000) is a "logic of expressive choice." In economic words, he contends that people vote to express their preferences, allegiances, and, ultimately, themselves. Other sources establish that individual turnout and educational attainment have a noteworthy positive correlation and direct association (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). The finding aligns with a common observation in political science that education is often associated with higher levels of political engagement and civic participation.

However, it's worth noting that correlations do not imply causation. While a positive correlation exists, it doesn't necessarily mean higher education

directly causes increased voter turnout. As discussed above, there are a multiplicity of other factors that influence voter participation. Moreover, this study returns to our introduction, reiterating that most papers based in the West assume voter literacy. Contrary to such an opinion, the Global South inherently faces challenges in the socio-economic domain.

Specifically looking at the social variables that influence voter behaviour, Großer and Schram's "Neighborhood Information Exchange and Voter Participation: An Experimental Study" examines how social connections impact voter turnout by exploring the role of information exchange in a participation game. In their game-based study, some voters (receivers) learn about the turnout decisions of others (senders) (Großer & Schram, 2006). The researchers distinguish cases where voters support the same or different candidates or have uncertain preferences. Results show that information exchange significantly boosts political participation. Senders strategically use their first-mover advantage, and some receivers respond accordingly. Similarly, in "Neighbourhood and Voting: A Sociometric Examination," Fitton (1973) explains how political behaviour requires looking at the social context of decision-making, a crucial yet often overlooked aspect. While most of the existing data focuses on the West, some sources provide insight into the political sphere in the Orient.

Many of these works stress the gender gaps existing in present-day society and how they inevitably impact voter turnout. For instance, Simanchala Das' *Voting Behaviour in India* presents findings that stem from extensive research on voting behaviour within a developing society, specifically in India. The project, conducted in the State of Orissa, explores electoral politics' trends, patterns, and dynamics at the regional level compared to the national mainstream (Das, 2018). The study recommends fostering political awareness among voters and a shift in the attitudes of political leaders, alongside electoral reforms, to enhance the democratic system. The notion of gender dynamics transcends this categorisation of literature because it is pertinent to all three subgroups: the West, the East, and the socio-economic facet.

Moreover, Sanjay Kumar's *Women Voters in Indian Elections: Changing Trends and Emerging Patterns* provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolving role of women in Indian electoral politics. The study delves into various aspects of women's political participation, shedding light on both the progress made and the persisting challenges (Kumar, 2021). By examining

empirical data from 11 Indian states, the book offers insights into women's voting behaviour and political activities across different regions. It explores the individual and motivational factors that influence women's participation in elections and the impact of political socialization within the household.

Additionally, the book scrutinizes the role of internalized patriarchy and its implications for women's political opinions and actions. The text also addresses the obstacles women face in their quest for representation in Indian politics. While limited research has directly observed the social circles transmitting political information and influence, this paper aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of local, neighbourhood-based social networks on individual political attitudes. The paper seeks to achieve this through the methodology, wherein interviews of voters will take place in a setting such that they belong to the same circle, socially and geographically.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this research paper involved conducting a survey on Golf Course Road in Gurugram on April 3, 2024, targeting 70 respondents aged 17 or older. A structured questionnaire comprising 20 questions (18 multiple-choice questions (MCQs) and 2 free-response questions) was administered to literate individuals comfortable with English. Respondents could answer these questions at their own pace in a non-timed setting. They were allowed to skip any questions they felt uncomfortable with, adhering to ethical considerations.

Conversely, in-person interviews were conducted orally in Hindi for respondents who were not proficient in English. These interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription and translation processes. The qualitative data gathered from these interviews was transcribed and analysed alongside the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire. This mixed-methods approach combined quantitative experimental elements and qualitative ethnography, enabling a comprehensive examination of the research topic. Overall, this primary data collection method facilitated a nuanced understanding of the respondents' attitudes, preferences, and experiences, contributing valuable insights to the research findings.

Results

1. Age Distribution

The survey categorized respondents into nine distinct age groups: 17-18, 19-28, 29-38, 39-48, 49-58, 59-68, 69-78, 79-88, and 89 or above. This segmentation facilitates a detailed understanding of how political views and engagement differ across various life stages. The 17-18 age group comprises the youngest participants, including first-time voters or those soon eligible to vote. Their engagement levels and political priorities often differ from older groups, focusing primarily on education and future employment opportunities. The 19-28 group typically consists of young adults, college students, and early career professionals, with political concerns often revolving around higher education affordability, job market conditions, and social issues such as gender equality and climate change. Lastly, the 29-38 age group, often established in their careers and starting families, shows significant interest in healthcare policies, education reform, and public safety. Their political engagement tends to be pragmatic, focusing on immediate impacts on their families and communities.

Additionally, the 39-48 group represents mature professionals and parents of teenagers, with political priorities including a balance of economic stability, educational quality for their children, and robust healthcare services. The 49-58 age group approaching retirement also focuses on healthcare security, pension policies, and public safety, with a keen interest in the sustainability of social services and the political climate affecting their nearing retirement. The 59-68 age group, often transitioning into retirement or recently retired, shows heightened concern for the adequacy of retirement funds, the quality and accessibility of healthcare, and policies affecting social security and pensions. Their priorities also include ensuring the healthcare system can cater to their increasing medical needs.

Furthermore, the 69-78 age group is primarily concerned with maintaining their health, financial security, and personal safety. As they navigate the complexities of aging, issues such as the availability of affordable healthcare services, the security of their retirement income, and elder care policies become particularly important. This group also values community services and support systems that enhance their quality of life. The 79-88 age group focuses heavily on healthcare services in terms of accessibility and quality. Long-term care options, home healthcare services, and policies that protect their financial stability are crucial. This group often relies on family and

community support and shows interest in policies supporting caregivers and enhancing social services for older adults.

Finally, the 89 or above age group, representing the oldest participants, prioritizes high-quality elder care, comprehensive healthcare coverage, and support services that allow them to live with dignity and independence. Physical and cognitive challenges may limit this group's engagement. However, they still express strong opinions on issues directly impacting their well-being, such as elder abuse prevention, social security, and the sustainability of Medicare. Most respondents fall into the 29-38, 39-48, and 49-58 age groups, indicating significant representation from the middle-aged population, who are typically highly engaged in political processes due to the direct impact of policies on their immediate and future well-being.

2. Political Engagement:

Many respondents express active engagement in political matters, as evidenced by their opinions on various policies and candidates in the survey. This engagement is apparent in their participation in elections, discussions about political issues, and advocacy for specific policies. There is a notable interest in policies addressing gender-based issues, education reform, healthcare accessibility, and public safety. These areas are consistently highlighted as priorities across different age groups. Many respondents also acknowledge the importance of informed decision-making in elections, emphasizing the impact of their votes on policy outcomes. This awareness suggests a population engaged and conscious of its role in shaping governance. Some respondents are involved in advocacy and activism, participating in campaigns and supporting causes that align with their political beliefs. This active participation indicates a vibrant democratic engagement beyond just voting.

3. Support for Gender Equality and Women's Safety

Gender equality and women's safety emerge as critical issues among the respondents. Many express strong support for policies aimed at addressing gender disparities and enhancing safety for women. Respondents advocate for comprehensive measures to tackle gender-based violence, equal pay, and opportunities for women in all sectors. There is an apparent demand for stricter enforcement of existing laws and the introduction of new policies where gaps exist. The high level of support for gender equality indicates significant social awareness and recognition of the challenges faced by women. This awareness is crucial for driving legislative and societal changes. Both male and female

respondents show engagement in gender-related issues, suggesting that they view gender equality as a societal goal rather than a women's problem alone.

4. Education and Healthcare Policies

Education and healthcare are two sectors that receive widespread support for reform and improvement. Respondents emphasize the need for an accessible education system catering to all socio-economic backgrounds, which is fundamental in a diverse society like India with wide income gaps. Key areas of focus also include affordability (making higher education affordable and reducing student debt), quality of service (ensuring high-quality education through well-trained teachers and modern facilities), and inclusivity (promoting inclusive education that accommodates students with diverse needs and backgrounds). Further, healthcare policies garner significant attention, with respondents advocating for universal healthcare systems that ensure all individuals have access to medical services, reducing the cost of medical treatments and medications, and enhancing the quality of healthcare services through better infrastructure and trained medical personnel.

5. Public Safety and Employment Generation

Public safety and employment generation are critical areas of concern for many respondents. There is strong support for policies that ensure the safety of citizens, with key aspects including effective and fair law enforcement practices, community programs to reduce crime through community engagement and support programs, and improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of emergency services. Employment policies are equally important, with respondents highlighting the need for job creation, particularly in high-growth industries. Similarly, training and re-skilling programs, encouraging entrepreneurship through financial support, and reducing bureaucratic hurdles are crucial in helping workers adapt to changing job markets.

6. Additional Comments

Some respondents provided additional comments, offering more profound insights into their political engagement and views. The importance of candidate approachability and responsiveness to constituents is emphasized, with respondents valuing politicians who are accessible and willing to engage with the public on critical issues. There is an acknowledgment of the impact of voter behaviour on election outcomes and the need for informed decision-making,

with respondents stressing the importance of understanding policies and candidate positions before voting.

Many respondents also highlighted the significance of a candidate's history in the political sphere and their personality, confidence, and oration skills. Honesty, knowledge, and work ethics were also crucial traits for political candidates to appeal to the voters. Furthermore, the party's ideology significantly impacts voting decisions, as many voters suggested that they often align with parties whose values resonate with their own. A candidate's work experience and qualifications are also crucial, with voters preferring candidates with a proven track record and the necessary expertise to fulfil their roles effectively.

Conclusion

The data presented in this report highlights the diverse range of political views and priorities among the surveyed individuals. While there is consensus on specific vital issues such as education, healthcare, and gender equality, there are also nuanced perspectives that reflect the complexity of political engagement.

a. Active Participation

The findings highlight the importance of active participation in the political process. Respondents demonstrate a high level of engagement through their advocacy, voting behaviour, and discussions on political matters. This active participation not only manifests in voting but extends to being involved in political campaigns, participating in public forums, and engaging in discussions about political issues in their communities. The enthusiasm for political engagement indicates a populace that values its role in the democratic process and understands the importance of collective action in shaping governance.

b. Informed Electorate

The emphasis on informed decision-making suggests a populace that is conscious of the impact of their political choices. Respondents consistently stress the importance of understanding policies, candidate positions, and the broader implications of electoral outcomes. This level of awareness is crucial for the functioning of a healthy democracy, as it ensures that the electorate makes choices based on a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

rather than being swayed by superficial campaign rhetoric or partisan biases. The informed voters are a testament to the effectiveness of civic education and the availability of information that empowers citizens to make educated decisions.

c. Policy Implications

Policymakers and stakeholders can use these insights to tailor their policies and campaigns to address the concerns and priorities of different age groups. Understanding public sentiment is crucial in developing practical and inclusive policies. For instance, the strong demand for education reform and healthcare accessibility can guide legislative priorities and budget allocations. Similarly, the support for gender equality and public safety measures can inform the development of targeted initiatives that address specific community needs. Policymakers can also leverage the active engagement of the populace to foster a more participatory approach to governance, where citizens are involved in the decision-making process through consultations, public hearings, and other forms of direct engagement.

Summing up

The findings of this research on voter motivations in Gurugram provide profound insights into the dynamics of political engagement in an Indian context, diverging significantly from Western-centric studies. This paper aimed to address notable gaps in the literature by considering the motivations of voters who are not literate, adults aged 18 and above participating in elections for the first time, and the particularities of gender and socio-economic circumstances in a non-Western setting. The results underscore the multifaceted nature of voter behaviour and highlight several key themes that resonate across age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.

The literature on voter behaviour predominantly focuses on Western democracies, strongly emphasizing the rational choice theory and psychological factors influencing voter turnout. Scholars like Blais André and Edlin Aaron have extensively explored how rational choice theory, encompassing utility maximization and cost-benefit analysis, explains voter participation. These studies, however, often assume voter literacy and overlook the socio-economic and cultural specificities of non-Western contexts. This paper bridges this gap by examining voter motivations in Gurugram, India, expanding the geographical and contextual scope of existing research.

One significant gap in the current body of knowledge is the limited consideration of illiterate voters and their motivations. Most Western studies assume a baseline of voter literacy, which does not hold in many parts of the Global South. By including illiterate voters through in-person interviews in their native language, this research provides a more inclusive understanding of voter behaviour that accommodates diverse educational backgrounds. This approach not only democratizes the data collection process but also ensures that the voices of traditionally marginalized groups are heard and analysed.

Additionally, existing studies often focus on young adults who have recently gained voting rights, neglecting the motivations of older adults who might be voting for the first time or are re-engaging with the electoral process after a long hiatus. This paper addresses this oversight by including a wide age range of respondents, capturing a broader spectrum of electoral motivations. This inclusivity enriches the understanding of how life stages and accumulated experiences influence political engagement, offering a more nuanced view than that provided by studies restricted to younger demographics.

In Western contexts, the lens of socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity frequently analyse voter motivations, significantly emphasizing the structural inequalities that influence electoral participation. Scholars like Carol Anderson have highlighted the impact of race-based voter suppression in the United States, while others have examined the role of economic strata in shaping voter behaviour. While these factors are also relevant in India, the socio-economic landscape presents unique challenges and variations. For instance, the intersection of caste, religion, and economic status creates a complex matrix that influences political behaviour differently from Western paradigms.

This research contributes to the literature by situating voter motivations within the specific socio-political context of India, where issues like caste-based discrimination, regional disparities, and economic inequalities play a pivotal role. Doing so highlights the necessity of contextualizing voter behaviour studies to account for local realities. This approach not only enhances the understanding of Indian electoral politics but also provides comparative insights that can inform studies in other non-Western democracies facing similar socio-economic challenges.

Another critical area where this research adds value is its examination of gender dynamics and socio-economic circumstances. Western studies have increasingly focused on the gender gap in political participation, as seen in

works by Sanjay Kumar on the evolving role of women in Indian electoral politics. However, these studies often do not capture the full extent of how gender intersects with other socio-economic factors in shaping voter behaviour. This research delves into female voters' specific challenges and motivations in Gurugram, highlighting issues like gender-based violence, economic empowerment, and educational opportunities. By incorporating women's perspectives and analysing their unique political priorities, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in electoral participation. The focus on gender and analysis of socio-economic factors enriches the literature by providing a holistic view of voter motivations that accounts for multiple intersecting influences.

In summary, this research addresses significant gaps in the existing literature by including illiterate voters, a wide age range of respondents, and a detailed examination of gender and socio-economic factors in an Indian context. By doing so, it expands the geographical and contextual scope of voter behaviour studies and provides valuable comparative insights that can inform research in other non-Western democracies. Including diverse educational backgrounds, age groups, and gender perspectives ensures a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of political engagement, thereby contributing to the existing body of literature on political science, public policy, gender studies, sociology, and South Asian studies.

This research highlights the need for more localized studies that consider the specific socio-political realities of different regions. The findings underscore the importance of contextually rich analyses that move beyond Western-centric models and assumptions. By situating voter behaviour within the unique socio-economic and cultural landscape of Gurugram, this paper provides a template for future research in other non-Western contexts, ultimately enriching the global understanding of electoral motivations and political engagement.

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