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Determinants of Voting Behaviour in India: Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

The study of determinants of electoral behaviour constitutes a very significant area of empirical investigation. Man is a rational creature in the philosophical sense of term; he is not so rational in the realms of his economic or political behaviour. An empirical study of the determinants of electoral behaviour displays the astounding fact that the behaviour of man is influenced by several irrational factors and pressure groups in invoking religious and communal factors, influence of money or charismatic personality of a leader and host of other irrational forces have their definite influence on the minds of the voters. The main purpose of the present study is to focus attention on voting behaviour in India and to highlight the factors that determine the voting behaviour in India.

Key Words: Determinants, Voting Behaviour, Election, Constituency, Respondents etc.

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 system, and their number is quite large and ever increasing, each adult citizen uses 'voting' as a means of expressing his approval or disapproval of government decisions, policies and programmes, the policies and programmes of various political parties and qualities of candidate who are engaged in struggle to get the status of being the representatives of 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 Massaavir point out, voting covers as many as six important functions:

1. It involves individuals choice of governors or major governmental policies;
2. It permits individuals to participate in a reciprocal and continuing exchange of influence with the office-holders and candidates;
3. It contributes to the development or maintenance of an individuals allegiance to the existing constitutional regime;
4. It contributes to the development or maintenance of a voters disaffection from the existing constitutional regime;
5. It has emotional significance for the individuals; and for some individuals it may be functionless, i.e. devoid of any significant personal emotional or political consequences.

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

Samuel S.Eldersveld in his '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 elections. In the words of Plana and Riggs, "voting Behaviour, is a field of study concerned with the ways in which people tend to vote in public elections and reasons why they vote as they as they do." The voting Behaviour has recently been expanded in the meaning and is taken as one major and broad area of study.

The study of electoral behaviour constitutes a very significant area of empirical investigation. Man is a rational creature in the philosophical sense of the term; he is not so rational in the realms of his economic or political behaviour. An empirical study of the electoral behaviour displays the astounding fact that the behaviour of man is influenced by several irrational factors and pressure group in invoking religious and communal factors, influence of money or charismatic personality of a leader and a host of other irrational forces can 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 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 behaviour in view, Prof. V.M. Sirsikar well observers,"An enquiry into the process of elections indicates factors other than rationality. It may be said that India has secured a stable government; but the means of mass manipulation, castes influences minority fears and charismatic hold of the Prime Minister have played no part in

this process”.

Voting Behaviour in India

India is the largest working democracy, a parliamentary democracy, in the world. At the time of March-April 1996 polls, an electorate of as many as 591.5 million voters went to the polls to choose their representatives from amongst 14474 contestants. All men and women of 18 years or above of the age have the right to vote in Indian elections. Despite the fact that nearly half of them are illiterates, they have in the past acted wisely and in mature way to elect their representatives. They have already participated in Eleven elections to Lok Sabha, several elections to state legislative assemblies and a large number of bi- elections.

With the first general elections held in India in 1952 was some election studies conducted. In the beginning these studies lack methodological rigor and sophistication. But as more and more studies of election politics and voting behaviour were made the research tools used by psychologists became increasingly sharpened. At the outset most of these studies were impressionistic and journalistic in orientation. However, with the increased use of survey method and observation technique has the quality of election studies in India improved.

Election studies in India were mainly inspired by western studies on voting behaviour, especially the Columbia and Michigan studies in the United States. The scholars of Columbia university of New York emphasized the influence of social and environmental forces on the choices of voters. While the studies undertaken by the Michigan Survey Research Centre stressed the psychological variables or the subjective world of the individual voters.

In reaction to the excessive emphasis on social and socio-psychological variables by the above two schools, a group of scholars with a view to redressing the balance in voting research, tended to draw attention to impact of political variables on voters choice. In reference to American voters, key stated that the electorate was not “strait-jacketed” by social determinants or moved by sub-conscious urges triggered by devilishly skillful propagandists. He said that it was rather one of an “electorate moved by concern about central and relevant questions of public policy, of governmental performance, and executive personality”

Elections in India have been mainly studied by political scientists, but the contributions of social Anthropologists in this respect can not be ignored. Special mention must be of F.G. Baily and A.C. Mayer who have dealt with elections mainly at micro-level. With the help of both participants and non-participants observation technique they have delved into the election politics and voting behaviour of the people. They have further emphasized the linkage between local, state and national politics which is woven round patronage and brokerage. They have highlighted the “Machine” character of election politics.

Determinants of voting Behaviour

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. Despite making their professions for enlightened secularism, politicians can be found invoking 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 are 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. That is, national elections or the election of the chief executive engage wider attention than a local election for the post of a sub-ordinate authority. The force of charisma has its own part to play where by voters are influenced en masse by the slogan of “Garibi Hatao”, or ‘A vote for a pair of bullocks is a vote for Panditji is and a vote for panditji vote for stability and progress; or ‘Indira means India, India means Indira’ and the like.

Voting Behaviour studies can be divided into two major categories; one school of thought has followed the sociological approach. The study which is most representative of this point of view is contained in the book ‘voting’ by Berelson, Lazarsfeld and Mcphee. It stresses the fact that socio-economic and ethnic status is related to the process of the voters choice. The conclusion in the books ; Within the various social strata (ethnic, religious and economic) the political parties maintain fairly constant rates of support which differ markedly from one stratum to next .In order to account for this, one has to assume that political discussion goes. On mainly within certain groups and is much less likely to cross social barriers of all kinds. The other school of thought is represented by the authors of the American voters.

In contrast with the sociological approaches of the Columbia school the Ann Arbor group presented the psychological and political approach. The psychological approach does recognize the role of social characteristics like socio-economic status, religion and family influence. However, it argues “The distribution of social characteristics in a population varies but slowly over a period of time. Yet crucial fluctuations in the national vote occur from election to election. Such fluctuation can not be accounted for by independent variables which over brief spans of time, do not vary. The attitudinal approach directed more attention to political objects of orientation such as the candidate and the issues, which do shift in the short term.

Parties, candidate and issues are the immediate determinants of voting behaviour. They are the intervening variables. The intervene between the distant but more permanent sociological and political forces that operate upon the voter and his actual vote. The psychological school has concentrated on three variables, party-identification, and candidate-orientation and issue orientation. They recognize these as the most significant factors. By party identification is meant a voters psychological attachment to a political party. By issue orientation, is meant the attitude of a person towards current questions and as to what the government should do or should not do. Issue orientation is the determinant in voting behaviour in the U.S.A because: Political parties do not adopt clear cut and distinct positions on current issues.

Voters are most concerned about general issues than specific issues. Candidate- orientation means the attitude of the voter towards the personal qualities of the candidate. This can be broken up further into his performance, capabilities and his personal qualities like his honesty, his religious devotion etc. candidate – orientation is significant factor. The data pertaining to the elections and the electoral process can help us to analyze the voting behaviour of the people of India. Infact, the voting behaviour studies conducted in India have identified the following main political and socio-economic factors which act as determinants of voting behaviour in India.

Caste

Caste continues to be a determinant of voting behaviour 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 behaviour. Votes are demanded in the name of caste. “Jat Ki Vote Jat Ko.” Brahmin votes vs Jat votes or Jat votes vs Ahir votes etc., are commonly used ‘principles’ in planning election strategy.

Religion

The establishment of a secular state in India by guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion to everyone, treating every religion as equal and non Recognition of any religion as a state religion-has not been successful in preventing the role of the religion as a determinant of political behaviour in general and voting behaviour in particular. The existence of such political parties and non political groups as stand linked with a particular religion, for example ,the Muslim league, the Akali Dal, the Hindu Maha Sabha, the Shiv Sena etc.has 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 the 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.

Language

India is a multi lingual state. There are 18 officiaal languages and several hundred other languages and dialects. Linguism also serves as a 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 the states like that of the status of one particular language in that state or relating to the quality of the status of a language of a state for example, in Haryana there has been a demand for declaring Punjabi as the second official language. The Punjabis want that the language status should be conferred on Punjabi in Haryana (this was realized in 1996). In Karnataka there is a demand that Kannada alone should be the medium of instructions in schools, but it is being opposed by other ethnic groups. Such problems are presenting in almost all the states since people have emotional attachment with their languages, they easily get influenced whenever there comes up any issue relating to language. Linguistic interest always influence voting behaviour.

Money Factor

The role of money can not be ignored in the study of electoral behaviour. Though India is a poor country, crores of rupees are spent in election. In the present political and economic context, the conduct of election and the electioneering campaign led by candidates and political parties have tended to be costly. While the 1952 elections to parliament and the state legislatures cost Rs. 10.50 crores, the 1980 elections to the Lok Sabha alone cost about Rs. 52 crores, notwithstanding all the economy measures taken to keep the costs down. It must be stressed here that this is a conservative estimate based perhaps on the returns filed by the candidates to the election commission. These incurred. Certainly with the present system of conducting elections, the costs will escalate at least in proportion to the rise in the cost of living.

Moreover, inspite of specifying a celing on expenditure that a candidate can make in his election, the amendment in the representation of the people act of 1974 has laid down that the amount spent by a party shall not be taken as an expenditure made by the candidate. The role of money in the politics of our country should, however, be discovered in the politics of political funding. It finds place in the world of big industrialists and

capitalists to various political parties, particularly the congress party. The statutory ban on donations made by business companies to political parties, imposed by the legislation of 1969 has certainly failed to, achieve the legislator like B.K.P. Sinha who had rightly warned that the money coming from the companies “is legitimate and white; if this is stopped, deals would be struck under the table and black money would have full sway”.

However, money is not everything in an election, money and musclemen alone that one can win an election. Money and musclemen have to be used covertly. In some cases, excessive use of money or musclemen also brings about a reaction against the candidate who uses them.

Current events

The current problems and difficulties faced by the people as well as recent political developments or the poll eve developments also act as determinants of voting behaviour. The political and economic events of the election year also act as determining factors. The price rise, shortages and other economic hardships faced by the people during 1966-67 helped several Political parties in considerably reducing the popularity of the congress with the masses. In 1967, the congress, though it retained its majority at the centre, suffered a loss of popularity which was reflected in its poor performance in the elections to the Legislative Assemblies. However, the victory in the 1971 Indo-pak war turned the tide in favour of the Congress in the elections that followed. In 1984 of the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi created a huge sympathy wave in favour of the congress(I) and its leaders Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, the assassination of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi on 21st May, stemmed the swing away to a low swing in favour of the Congress(I). The violent protests against the decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report by the Janta dal Government in 1990 played a definite role in reducing its popularity. In the election, the current event like the Kargil victory always influences the voting behaviour.

Election Campaigns

Each party launches a vigorous 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, T.V and radio broadcasts, News Paper advertisements, hand bills, processions and propaganda is made to win votes, particularly the floating votes during the election campaigns. The election campaigns are 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. Thus acts as an important determinant of voting behaviour.

Local Issues

Local issues always influence the choice of the voters. A regional or a local party always tries to identify itself with local issues and there by secures for itself popular local support. The success of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in Jharkhand region of Bihar is a classic example which highlights the role of local issues as determinants of voting behaviour. The spectacular success of the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh in the 1999 Lok Sabha and Andhra Vidhan Sabha elections was largely determined by its image as a local party identified with the local interests of the state and having a good support with the centre. All regional parties try to win elections on local issues. In fact, all agencies of public opinion always act as determinants of voting behaviour.

Mass Illiteracy

Mass illiteracy has been another factor of voting behaviour 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 votes of the illiterates constitute a big proportion of the votes polled and hence they play a big role in determining the outcomes of elections. However, despite this feature, the common sense and maturity born out of the experience of the past has also been playing a big role in influencing the voter's minds and actions. In 1997, they united to defeat the forces of authoritarianism and in 1980, they again united to defeat the disunited non-performers.

Conclusion

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.

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