



Voting Behaviour in Assam: Exploring Key Determinants and Influences

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Abstract

Voting is one of the most used terms in the contemporary era of democratic politics. Voting behaviour refers to the way individuals make decisions when they participate in elections. Voting behaviour is a key part of political science that helps explain how democracies function and evolve based on the choices of their citizens. Voting is both a right and a responsibility. It is the foundation upon which democratic governments are built and sustained. The main purpose of the present study is to focus attention on voting behaviour in Assam and to highlight the factors that determine the voting behaviour.

Keywords: Voting, determinants, voting behaviour, election.

Introduction

Voting is the main form of political participation in liberal democratic societies. It is an essential process in the democratic set up and plays a pivotal role in smooth functioning and existence of democracy. Voting is considered as the mechanism of reaching consensus and at the same time an imperative means of institutionalizing conflicts amid various groups. It refers to the process by which citizens express their choices or preferences in elections or other decision-making activities. As a fundamental element of democratic systems, voting empowers people to choose their representatives, voice their opinions on policies, and influence the way they are governed. Voting is the behaviour and action of the voters at the time of election. It serves as one of the most important means of political participation, giving individuals a direct role in shaping public affairs. It is one of those focal points of the democratic process when political activities reach a very high peak (Ganguly and Ganguly, 1975:1) ^[1]. Though the voting appears on the surface to be of transient importance, it surely tells us a great deal about the society and its linkage with the polity (Elkins, 1975: v) ^[2]. Sociologists tend to consider the socio-economic determinants of support for political parties, examining the correlations between class, occupation, ethnicity, sex, age and vote. Political scientists, on the other hand, have concentrated on the influence of political factors such as issues, political programmes, electoral campaigns, and the popularity of party leaders on voting behaviour. Samuel J. Eldersveld remarked that voting behaviour connotes today more than examination of voting records, compilation of voting statistics and computation of electoral shifts (Eldersveld, 1972:267) ^[3].

The study of electoral behavior and its determinants is a vital area of empirical research in contemporary political science. While humans are considered rational beings philosophically, their decisions—particularly in political or economic contexts—are not always guided by pure reason. Empirical studies consistently show that voting behavior is often shaped by a range of irrational influences. These include pressure groups, religious or communal appeals, financial inducements, and the charismatic appeal of individual leaders. Such factors exert a powerful, often subconscious, influence on the electorate. As a result, the study of voting behavior has become an essential part of modern political theory, bridging political science and sociology. This intersection has given rise to a growing field known as political sociology, which examines how social forces impact political actions. Ultimately, the empirical analysis of electoral behavior highlights the complex and often irrational nature of voter decision-making.

Objectives

The main objectives of the present study are-

- i). To focus attention on voting behaviour in Assam
- ii). To study the key determinants of voting behaviour.

Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical based on secondary sources. The data are collected from reports of the Election Commission of India, Assam election handbooks, relevant books, journals, magazines, government and non-governmental reports, website and newspapers. Internet resources also have been accessed extensively.

Importance of Voting

Strengthens Democracy: Voting is a cornerstone of any democratic society. It allows citizens to express their views, influence public policies, and hold elected leaders accountable for their actions. High voter turnout is a sign of a healthy democracy, reflecting an informed and engaged population. When many people take part in elections, it shows that citizens are actively involved in shaping their government and the direction of their country.

Empowers Citizens: Voting is a powerful tool that allows citizens to take an active role in their government. It gives people the ability to help shape the policies and leadership that impact their everyday lives. When individuals vote, they are not just selecting representatives—they are also contributing to the decisions that guide the future of their communities and their nation.

Ensures Accountability: In a democracy, voting is a key mechanism through which citizens hold their elected officials accountable. It gives the public the power to reward leaders who fulfill their promises and serve the common good—and to remove those who do not. This ability to choose and change leadership ensures that government remains responsive to the people it serves.

Voting as a Tool for Social Change: Throughout history, voting has served as a vital instrument for driving social progress. Across the globe, marginalized and underrepresented groups have fought hard to secure this fundamental right. Movements such as the U.S. civil rights struggle, the women's suffrage campaign, and global efforts toward universal voting rights highlight how electoral participation has been used to confront injustice and inequality. By casting their votes, people have the power to advocate for changes in critical areas like poverty, education, healthcare, climate action, and human rights. Voting enables citizens to hold leaders accountable, support candidates who reflect their values, and influence key decisions through referendums. Each vote becomes a meaningful opportunity to shape society's direction and promote fairness, particularly for communities lacking equal access to resources and opportunities.

Determinants of Voting Behaviour

Voting behavior is shaped by a variety of factors, including religion, caste, community, language, economic influence, political ideology or policy, the purpose of the election, the extent of the franchise, and prevailing political trends. Voter interest and participation are also influenced by the nature of the elections and the scope of suffrage available to the electorate. In the context of Assam, voting behavior is affected by several region-specific social, cultural, and political factors. This module aims to highlight the key determinants that influence voter behavior in the state. In Assam following main political and socio-economic factors which act as determinants of voting behaviours.

Leadership and Voter Confidence in Assam Politics:

To earn the trust and support of voters, political parties must be led by strong, charismatic leaders. Since India's independence, Assam has witnessed the emergence of several influential leaders across major political parties. Leaders like Gopinath Bordoloi, Bishnuram Medhi, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Hiteswar Saikia, and Tarun Gogoi from the Indian National Congress; Dr. Prafulla Kumar Mahanta from the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP); and Sarbananda Sonowal and Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma from the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP), have significantly shaped the state's political landscape. These leaders were known for their decisive actions and ability to connect with the masses, which contributed to the success of their respective parties in various elections. Gopinath Bordoloi's role in establishing and protecting the interest of the people is always been remembered in Assam (Sanjay Hazarika, 2022 & Lily Mazumdar Boruah, 1992) ^[4]. Hiteswar Saikia's role during the Assam Movement (1979-85) and handling the insurgent groups of Assam was remarkable (Mahendra Bora, 1994). Dr. Prafulla Mahanta's role in the Assam Movement and handling of insurgency in Assam is outstanding (S.R. BBakshi *et al* 1998) ^[6]. Tarun Gogoi was a non-corrupt, simple, leader who was very popular among the people (Sushanta Talukdar, 2020) ^[7]. Sarbananda Sonowal's campaign slogan, "*Jati, Mati, Bheti*" (community, land, and identity), resonated deeply with the people of Assam and helped reinvigorate regional sentiment. These leaders were instrumental in bringing Assam's issues to the national stage. Their personal appeal, administrative experience, and leadership capabilities have often played a decisive role in shaping public opinion and voting patterns.

A major turning point came during the 2014 Indian general elections, when Narendra Modi spearheaded a powerful campaign centered around allegations of corruption and inefficiency under the UPA government. This struck a chord with voters nationwide and led to a sweeping BJP victory, widely referred to as the "*Modi wave*". Assam also experienced the ripple effects of this campaign. Despite the Congress being in power in the state, the BJP secured 7 out of the 14 Lok Sabha seats in Assam, marking a significant shift in voter preference. This transformation deepened in the lead-up to the 2016 Assam Legislative Assembly elections. Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, a key figure in the Congress government under Tarun Gogoi, left the INC along with several prominent leaders and joined the BJP. This realignment dramatically changed Assam's political equation. Ahead of the 2016 elections, the BJP projected Sarbananda Sonowal as its Chief Ministerial candidate. Sonowal had gained recognition for his role in advocating the repeal of the controversial IMDT Act and was admired for his commitment to regional concerns and clean public image. Simultaneously, Dr. Sarma brought to the party a reputation for being an energetic, effective, and result-oriented leader with strong administrative credentials. The combined leadership of Sonowal and Sarma made a powerful impression on the electorate. Their distinct strengths and public image played a critical role in shaping voter sentiment, ultimately contributing to the BJP's decisive victory in the 2016 Assembly elections. Their leadership continued to influence political developments in the state, marking a new chapter in Assam's governance and electoral politics.

BJP's Economic Development Agenda

During the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) crafted its campaign in Northeast India around the core themes of economic progress, infrastructure development, and effective governance. The party's manifesto underscored several priorities, including accelerating infrastructure projects, constructing four-lane highways and bridges across the Brahmaputra River, and tackling Assam's chronic flooding through comprehensive river water management strategies. Border security was also emphasized, with promises of enhanced fencing and a firm approach to resolving insurgency-related issues.

In the aftermath of the election, the central government initiated several connectivity and infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing the region's integration with neighboring countries, thereby boosting cross-border trade and regional development. This renewed focus on the Northeast particularly Assam had a notable impact on voter sentiment. Many residents viewed these efforts as sincere attempts to address the state's longstanding issues related to underdevelopment and isolation, fostering a sense of inclusion and optimism toward the central leadership.

The Illegal Migration Issue

The issue of illegal migration has remained a central theme in Assam's electoral politics since the days of the historic Assam Movement. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) came to power in 1985 largely on the promise of addressing this concern. However, during its two terms in office—from 1985 to 1990 and again from 1996 to 2001—the AGP failed to meet public expectations regarding the detection and deportation of undocumented migrants, particularly those from Bangladesh. Widespread allegations of corruption and ineffective governance further eroded the party's support, leading to a shift in voter preference towards the Indian National Congress (INC), which went on to govern the state for three consecutive terms.

In the 2016 Assam Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Shri Sarbananda Sonowal and Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, brought renewed focus to the issue of illegal immigration. The party raised concerns over the growing Muslim population in the lower Assam districts, attributing it to cross-border migration from Bangladesh. This demographic shift was framed as a threat to Assamese identity and cultural heritage. Central to the BJP's campaign was the promise to safeguard Assamese nationality from what it termed "demographic aggression." Coupled with the party's broader Hindutva narrative, this positioning struck a chord with a significant segment of the electorate and played a crucial role in the BJP's ascent to power in the state.

Populist Policy

In recent years, populist policies have played a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes. These policies, often aimed at uplifting the economically weaker sections, are particularly significant in states like Assam, which remains among the less developed regions of India. As per 2011–12 estimates, approximately 31.98% of Assam's population were living below the poverty line. The state's per capita income for 2021–22 stood at Rs. 100,761, indicating that a significant portion of the population depends on government assistance for their livelihood (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Assam).

While previous Congress-led governments also introduced pro-poor policies, such as the MGNREGA under the UPA, widespread allegations of corruption eroded public trust, ultimately weakening their electoral appeal. In contrast, the BJP governments—both at the Centre and in Assam—have adopted a model of *direct benefit transfer* (DBT) to minimize corruption and ensure that welfare schemes reach the intended beneficiaries. The BJP has implemented several major welfare schemes, including MGNREGA, Atal Amrit Abhiyan, Kisan Vikas Yojana, Ujjwala Scheme, PMAY, Old Age Pension Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, targeting different socio-economic segments. In addition, the Government of Assam has launched several state-specific welfare initiatives, such as

the Orunodoi Scheme, Anundoram Borooah Award for meritorious students, Fee Waiver Scheme for poor students, Nijut Moina Scheme, Silpi Sambardhana, Apon Ghar Home Loan Subsidy, Abhinandan Education Loan Subsidy, and the Swahid Kushal Konwar Sarbajanin Briddha Pension Achoni. Among these, the Orunodoi Scheme has emerged as the most impactful in terms of electoral influence. First announced by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma during his 2020–21 budget speech as Finance Minister, the scheme was launched on 2nd October 2020. Initially covering 24 lakh poor households, it provided Rs. 830 per month to each beneficiary, aiming to empower rural women and support families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the launch of Orunodoi 3.0, the scheme now extends monthly financial assistance of ₹1,250 to 37 lakh households. This expanded coverage and direct financial assistance have significantly contributed to the BJP's strong support base, especially in rural Assam, cementing the scheme's role as a key factor in the party's electoral success.

Importance to Regional Ethnic Communities

In the 2016 Assam Legislative Assembly elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) strategically formed alliances with organizations representing various smaller tribal and ethnic communities, including the Karbi, Dimas, Tiwa, Rabha, and Mising groups. By nominating influential leaders from these communities as party candidates, the BJP effectively secured their support and mobilized votes from these constituencies. Additionally, the party entered into a significant alliance with the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) during the 2016 elections. By 2021, the BJP shifted its alliance in the region to the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL).

This consistent approach of building coalitions with regionally influential ethnic organizations played a key role in shaping voting patterns across the state. It highlights how the BJP's strategy of inclusive political partnerships with smaller ethnic groups contributed to its expanding electoral base in Assam.

In Assam several political and socio-economic factors act as determinants of voting behaviours.

Influence of Party Ideology, Public Image, and Voter Trust on Electoral Success in Assam

The ideology, image, and public trust associated with a political party significantly contribute to its success in elections. In Assam, the majority of political parties adopt right-wing ideologies, particularly liberalism or capitalism, with the exception of parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the All India Forward Bloc, which adhere to Marxist-Leninist and communist ideologies.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) follows the Hindutva ideology inspired by V.D. Savarkar, while the Indian National Congress (INC) operates on a centrist framework, integrating principles from both the left and the right. The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) promotes regionalism and prioritizes the dominance and rights of the Assamese people. The All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) focuses on protecting the interests of the Muslim population in Assam, while the Rajgor Dal (RD) advocates for the rights of peasants and workers, leaning towards a leftist ideology. The Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) also emphasizes Assamese identity and control over the state's political and cultural affairs. It is evident that political ideology plays a critical role during elections, as many voters

tend to align themselves with parties that reflect their beliefs, identity, and community interests.

Impact of Party Image on Voter Support: In addition to ideology, the public perception and image of a party greatly influence voter behavior. Parties that successfully establish a strong and trustworthy image are more likely to attract voter support. For instance, the BJP's success in the 2016 Assam Assembly Elections was largely due to the leadership of Sarbananda Sonowal, who committed to addressing the issue of illegal immigration and safeguarding the rights of indigenous communities. This built a positive image of the BJP, which translated into increased electoral support. Furthermore, in the 2021 elections, the active role played by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, and his reforms in the education and healthcare sectors further enhanced the BJP's credibility and public image. These efforts significantly contributed to the party's continued electoral success. Other parties, such as the AJP and regional outfits, must similarly focus on strengthening their public image by addressing pressing local issues and building trust with the electorate.

Importance of Contemporary Local Issues: Contemporary issues play a crucial role in shaping voter preferences and can significantly influence the success of political parties. Voters generally expect political parties to address current and pressing problems rather than dwell on outdated concerns. Therefore, any party seeking public support must prioritize contemporary challenges that directly affect people's lives.

In Assam, a range of urgent and unresolved issues continue to dominate the political landscape. These include illegal immigration, flood control measures, opposition to large dam projects (like NHPC), updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), unemployment, constitutional safeguards, identity-related concerns, the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for six communities, calls for autonomous councils and separate states, the rights of tea garden workers, Sixth Schedule implementation, full implementation of the Assam Accord, border disputes and fencing, privatization of public sector undertakings, distribution of land pattas to indigenous populations, and the protection of ethnic and indigenous communities. These are not only persistent socio-political demands but also reflect the core expectations of the people of Assam. Political parties that fail to address these issues risk alienating large sections of the electorate.

Historical trends clearly demonstrate that voter sentiment in Assam is closely tied to how parties respond to contemporary concerns. For example, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) rose to power in 1986 on the back of the Assam Movement (1979–1985), which centered around issues of illegal immigration and Assamese identity. Similarly, Tarun Gogoi's leadership under the Congress gained public support in 2001, largely due to widespread dissatisfaction with AGP's governance during the 1990s. The BJP's electoral victories in 2016 and 2021 were influenced by rising concerns over identity, security, and the party's management during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pattern clearly indicates that voters in Assam prioritize relevant, contemporary issues when casting their votes. Hence, for a political party to gain or maintain public support, it must focus on solving the immediate and evolving concerns of the people.

Understanding Demographic Diversities: In electoral politics, demographic composition plays a vital role, especially in regions with significant diversity. Assam is a prime example, where the population is highly heterogeneous in terms of caste, religion, community, language, and culture.

For any political party aiming to gain public support in the state, understanding and addressing this demographic diversity is crucial. According to the 2011 Census, Assam's population comprises approximately 61.47% Hindus and 34.22% Muslims. Among its 33 districts, Hindus form the majority in 24 districts, while Muslims are the majority in the remaining 9 districts. Additionally, Scheduled Castes (SC) make up 6.9%, Scheduled Tribes (ST) constitute 12.44%, and Other Backward Classes (OBC) represent 25% of the total population. Within the ST category, 14% belong to the plains tribes and 15% to the hill tribes. The tribal and non-tribal populations have historically influenced Assam's electoral outcomes. There are nearly 3.88 million tribal people in the state, making up about 12.45% of the total population. The non-tribal population accounts for the remaining 87.55%, but within this group, SCs, STs, and OBCs together form 44.35%, while 55.66% belong to the general or unreserved category. These figures highlight the need for political parties in Assam to adopt tailored strategies that resonate with the state's diverse communities. Success in elections depends significantly on recognizing and addressing the unique concerns and aspirations of these varied demographic groups.

Connection with Media: In the 21st century, media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse. As a key medium for mass communication, it serves as a bridge between political entities and the public. Given this influence, it is essential for political parties to maintain strong and strategic ties with all forms of media—be it print, electronic, or social media. In Assam, both print and electronic media have become powerful tools in the political landscape. These platforms regularly publish and broadcast the statements, opinions, and ideologies of political parties, helping to spread their messages to a wide audience. Electronic media are actively broadcasting daily news and political content across the state. These platforms play a critical role in highlighting party agendas, broadcasting election campaigns, and shaping public debates. In this context, political parties in Assam must effectively leverage both print and electronic media to communicate their visions, policies, and priorities to the electorate. A strong media strategy can significantly enhance their outreach and influence in the state's complex political environment.

Party Identification

It means the psychological attachment of the voters to a political party. Since the Lok Sabha and Bidhan Sabha elections from 2014 to 2024 in Assam, the electorates of the state mostly voted for the BJP party.

Caste and Voting Behaviour: Caste remains a significant factor influencing voting behavior in India. Deeply embedded in the social structure, caste continues to shape interpersonal and group relations across various levels of society. Despite constitutional safeguards and legal measures aimed at eliminating caste-based discrimination, its impact on political attitudes and decisions remains evident.

The intersection of caste and politics has become a defining feature of the Indian political landscape. Political parties, regardless of their ideological leanings, routinely consider caste dynamics when framing their policies, electoral strategies, and outreach programs. One clear example of this is seen in the selection of candidates, where caste often plays a decisive role in choosing who will contest elections from particular constituencies.

This enduring link between caste and politics reflects the complex socio-political fabric of India, where identity

continues to influence democratic processes in a profound way.

Religion and Voting Behaviour: Although India was established as a secular state—ensuring freedom of religion, equal treatment of all faiths, and rejecting the adoption of any official state religion—religion continues to influence political behavior, especially in voting patterns. The constitutional commitment to secularism has not fully eliminated the role of religion in the political arena. One of the key factors contributing to this is the presence of political parties and emerging political groups that are closely associated with specific religious communities. These entities often mobilize support along religious lines, reinforcing the connection between religious identity and electoral choices. As a result, religion remains a significant factor in shaping voter behavior despite the secular framework envisioned by the Constitution.

Issue Orientation: Voting behaviour of the voters is also affected by the socio-economic and political issues at the time of election. Majority of the voters in the sampled constituencies were more concerned with the local and regional problems during the poll. In 1985 general elections, the main issue was “Assam Accord”. The people voted the AGP party with the hope that the lakhs of illegal immigrants who have been living in the state would be expelled and the dream of “Sonar Asom” would be brought to reality.

Conclusion

The electoral politics of Assam is shaped by the interplay of multiple factors, including concerns over Assamese identity, the issue of illegal immigration, and the demand for socio-economic development. Leadership continues to be a critical factor in determining political outcomes in the state. A notable feature of Assam’s political landscape is the successful integration of smaller ethnic communities into the broader alliances of major political parties. At the same time, the growing dominance of national parties—particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—is increasingly visible, while regional parties have witnessed a steady decline, with their influence often limited to specific regions or ethnic groups.

The BJP’s rising influence across diverse sections of Assam’s population can be attributed to several key strategies. Its strong nationalist ideology has gained traction among voters, and its development-focused agenda—backed by the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre—has struck a chord with the electorate, particularly due to the increased attention given to the Northeast region. The party’s firm stance on illegal encroachments, especially those allegedly carried out by immigrant Muslim populations, has resonated with many indigenous Assamese voters, evoking sentiments that once fueled support for the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP). Moreover, the BJP has made significant inroads in rural areas through a range of pro-poor welfare schemes and beneficiary-based programs, which have helped consolidate its voter base.

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