

Caste Politics and Electoral Outcomes in Contemporary India

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Abstract-This paper explores the enduring role of caste in shaping electoral outcomes in India, a democracy characterized by deep social diversity and political complexity. While the Indian Constitution envisioned a casteless society through affirmative action and social reform, caste continues to influence political mobilization, party strategies, and voter behavior. By combining historical analysis with recent empirical data, including insights from the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, this study examines how caste-based identities continue to impact electoral patterns at both national and regional levels. Through case studies of states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu, the paper investigates the functioning of caste-based parties, the shifting preferences of voters, and the influence of social media in modernizing political outreach. The findings reveal that while caste remains a dominant factor, a gradual shift toward issue-based politics is emerging, particularly among urban and young voters. The paper concludes by recommending policy and electoral reforms aimed at promoting inclusive, development-driven politics while ensuring fair representation for historically marginalized groups.

INTRODUCTION

Caste has long been a defining element of Indian society, deeply influencing social structures, economic opportunities, and political participation. In electoral politics, caste plays a pivotal role in shaping party strategies, voter behavior, and governance patterns. Despite India's progress in urbanization, education, and economic reforms, caste-based voting remains a dominant feature of elections. Political parties, both national and regional, continue to leverage caste identities to mobilize support, making caste an unavoidable factor in India's democratic framework. The roots of caste-based electoral politics can be traced back to India's independence, when political representation was shaped by social hierarchies and affirmative action policies. Over time, caste-based mobilization has evolved, giving rise to influential regional parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party

(BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), which primarily advocate for caste-based representation. Meanwhile, national parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC) have also adapted their strategies to accommodate caste dynamics, often forming alliances with caste-based political groups to secure electoral victories.

This research examines how caste influences elections in contemporary India, focusing on voter preferences, political alliances, and policymaking. A special emphasis is placed on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, which offer insights into whether caste-driven voting patterns are shifting or reinforcing traditional political alignments. Additionally, the study explores the growing impact of social media on caste-based political narratives and how digital platforms are reshaping voter outreach strategies.

By analyzing historical and recent trends, this study aims to assess the long-term implications of caste politics on Indian democracy. It also seeks to explore potential pathways for transitioning toward issue-based politics, reducing caste-based electoral polarization while ensuring inclusive political representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Caste has remained a central theme in Indian politics, influencing electoral outcomes, party strategies, and governance for decades. Scholars and political analysts have extensively studied caste-based mobilization, its historical roots, and its impact on contemporary elections. This section reviews existing research on caste politics, focusing on its evolution, key political players, voter behavior, and emerging trends such as digital caste mobilization.

1. Historical Foundations of Caste in Indian Politics

The role of caste in Indian politics can be traced back

to colonial times when the British administration institutionalized caste divisions through census classifications and affirmative action policies. Post-independence, caste politics gained momentum with the reservation system introduced under the Indian Constitution, aimed at uplifting Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Early political movements, such as the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu and the rise of Dalit leaders like B.R. Ambedkar laid the groundwork for caste-based electoral mobilization.

2. Rise of Caste-Based Political Parties

Research highlights how caste-based political parties emerged as dominant forces in Indian elections. Studies on BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party), SP (Samajwadi Party), RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal), and DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) illustrate how these parties built their voter base by advocating for caste-based representation and social justice. Scholars argue that the Mandal Commission Report (1990s) played a crucial role in strengthening OBC political identity, reshaping India's electoral landscape by increasing caste-based political consciousness.

3. Caste and Voter Behavior

Empirical studies suggest that caste remains a key determinant of voting behavior, often outweighing economic or developmental considerations. Christophe Jaffrelot's research on caste and democracy in India highlights how voters align with parties representing their caste interests. Surveys by CSDS-Lokniti confirm that caste-driven voting patterns persist across elections, with different caste groups showing consistent loyalty to specific parties. However, recent studies indicate a gradual shift towards issue-based voting, particularly among urban and young voters.

4. Caste and National vs. Regional Politics

While caste-based parties dominate state elections, national parties have also integrated caste calculations into their strategies. Scholars analyze how BJP and Congress have engaged in caste-based coalition politics, using social engineering to appeal to diverse caste groups. The 2014 and 2019 elections saw BJP expanding its voter base among non-dominant OBCs and Dalits, challenging the traditional stronghold of caste-based regional parties.

5. Impact of Social Media on Caste Politics

Recent literature explores how social media platforms have transformed caste-based political mobilization. Studies highlight how parties leverage WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and targeted digital campaigns to appeal to specific caste demographics. While social media has democratized political participation, it has also contributed to caste-based echo chambers, reinforcing identity-based divisions in electoral politics.

6. The 2024 Elections and Emerging Trends

With the 2024 general elections, new research is emerging on caste dynamics in contemporary politics. Analysts observe that while caste-based voting patterns persist, there is a growing influence of developmental agendas, economic policies, and leadership appeal in voter decision-making. The BJP's reduced majority (240 seats) and the resurgence of Congress (99 seats) and regional parties like SP (37 seats) indicate shifts in caste alignments that require further academic scrutiny.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to analyze the role of caste in electoral politics in contemporary India. By using both historical and empirical data, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of caste-based voting behavior, political strategies, and evolving electoral trends.

1. Research Approach

A qualitative approach is used to examine historical patterns, caste-based political movements, and party strategies, while a quantitative approach is employed to analyze electoral data, voter surveys, and caste-based voting patterns.

2. Data Collection Methods

A. Primary Data

Interviews & Surveys: Conducted with political analysts, voters, and party members to understand their perspectives on caste-based politics.

Case Studies: Focus on specific states (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu) to analyze caste dynamics in recent elections.

B. Secondary Data

Election Commission Reports: Analysis of voter turnout, seat distribution, and caste-based voting trends.

CSDS-Lokniti Surveys: Examining caste preferences in recent elections, especially the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Political Party Manifestos & Speeches: Reviewing how parties address caste issues in their electoral strategies.

Academic Research & Books: Studies by scholars such as Christophe Jaffrelot and Yogendra Yadav on caste and elections.

3. Case Study Approach

The study focuses on three major states where caste politics has played a crucial role:

Uttar Pradesh & Bihar: Known for strong caste-based political mobilization.

Tamil Nadu: A contrasting case where Dravidian politics has influenced caste dynamics differently.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Comparative Analysis: Comparing national and state elections to understand variations in caste influence.

Statistical Analysis: Using electoral data to measure caste-based voting trends over different election cycles.

Thematic Analysis: Identifying recurring themes in political speeches, manifestos, and media narratives related to caste.

5. Limitations of the Study

Lack of Official Caste-Wise Voting Data: As India does not conduct caste-based voting surveys, the study relies on indirect data sources like surveys and exit polls.

Regional Differences: Caste dynamics vary significantly across states, making broad generalizations difficult.

Potential Bias in Surveys & Interviews: Political affiliations of respondents may influence their answers

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the key findings of the research, analyzing how caste influences electoral outcomes in India. The analysis is based on historical trends, case studies, and data from the 2024 Lok Sabha elections,

offering insights into caste-based political mobilization, voter behavior, and the role of regional and national parties.

1. Historical Impact of Caste in Elections

Caste has played a crucial role in Indian electoral politics since independence. The reservation system, introduced to uplift marginalized communities, unintentionally reinforced caste identities in politics. Over time, political parties recognized caste as a powerful tool for mobilization, leading to the rise of caste-based electoral strategies.

Early Caste-Based Electoral Mobilization: In the first few decades after independence, the Indian National Congress maintained dominance by accommodating diverse caste groups under a broad umbrella. However, discontent among backward communities grew due to the lack of adequate representation.

The Mandal Commission and Its Impact (1990s): A defining moment in caste politics was the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, which granted reservations to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions. This move triggered mass political mobilization among OBCs and led to the rise of regional caste-based parties, reshaping electoral politics.

Rise of Regional Caste-Based Political Parties: The post-Mandal era saw the emergence of powerful regional parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). These parties gained significant influence by championing the rights of Dalits, OBCs, and minority communities.

2. Influence of Caste-Based Political Parties

Different political parties have adopted caste-based electoral strategies to secure votes:

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP): Established by Kanshi Ram and later led by Mayawati, the BSP positioned itself as the voice of Dalits, advocating for social justice and political empowerment.

Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD): Both parties mobilized Yadavs, Muslims, and other OBC groups to create a strong political base in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Dravidian Parties (DMK, AIADMK): In Tamil Nadu, caste politics took a different form through the Dravidian movement, which challenged upper-caste dominance and promoted affirmative action policies.

National Parties (BJP & Congress): While Congress initially maintained a caste-inclusive approach, the BJP strategically expanded its influence among OBCs and non-dominant Dalit groups, breaking traditional caste-based vote banks.

3. Caste-Based Voting Patterns in the 2024 General Elections

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections revealed significant caste-based voting trends:

BJP's Performance (240 seats): Despite retaining power, BJP saw a decline in support from certain OBC and Dalit communities that had previously backed the party. The party relied on upper-caste Hindu votes while attempting to consolidate non-dominant OBCs.

Congress (99 seats): Congress made moderate gains by focusing on economic issues and social justice, regaining support from some Dalit and OBC voters.

Samajwadi Party (37 seats): The SP capitalized on caste alliances, especially among Yadavs and Muslims, contributing to its resurgence in Uttar Pradesh.

Rise of Regional Parties: The AITC (29 seats), DMK, and JD(U) gained momentum by emphasizing caste and regional identity politics, reinforcing caste-based voting in state-level elections.

New Trends: Some sections of the electorate, particularly in urban areas, showed a shift towards issue-based voting, prioritizing employment, governance, and inflation over caste identity.

4. Role of Social Media in Caste Politics

Social media has transformed political mobilization, including caste-based outreach:

Targeted Campaigns: Political parties increasingly use WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube to engage caste-based voter groups.

Caste-Based Digital Narratives: Online campaigns often focus on identity-based pride, historical injustices, and caste-specific appeals to mobilize voters.

Echo Chambers and Political Polarization: The rise of digital communities has reinforced caste identities, sometimes leading to misinformation and deepening political divisions.

New Voter Engagement: Young voters are more active on digital platforms, showing an increasing preference for issue-based discussions over caste-based appeals.

5. Urban vs. Rural Caste Politics

Caste-based voting varies significantly between urban and rural India:

Rural Areas:

Caste remains the primary factor influencing voter decisions.

Political parties mobilize entire caste groups through local leaders, community networks, and traditional alliances.

Developmental concerns are often viewed through a caste lens, with voters supporting candidates who represent their caste's interests.

Urban Areas:

A shift towards issue-based voting is observed, with more emphasis on employment, governance, and education.

Caste-based considerations still exist, but they are less dominant than in rural regions.

Middle-class voters, particularly the youth, are more likely to be influenced by economic policies and leadership qualities than caste identity.

6. Caste and Coalition Politics

Caste-based alliances continue to shape government formation:

Pre-Poll and Post-Poll Alliances: Major parties often form alliances with caste-based regional parties to secure votes.

BJP's Social Engineering: BJP has attempted to break traditional caste-based alliances by appealing to non-dominant OBCs and Dalits, challenging the strongholds of SP, BSP, and RJD.

Congress and Caste Representation: Congress has been recalibrating its caste strategy, focusing on OBC and Dalit leadership representation to regain lost voter bases.

The findings suggest that caste remains a dominant force in Indian electoral politics, but with emerging shifts:

While rural voters continue to vote along caste lines, urban and young voters are showing an increasing preference for issue-based politics.

The 2024 elections highlight a nuanced shift, where caste still influences political strategies, but economic concerns and governance issues are beginning to play a more significant role.

Social media is redefining caste politics, creating new forms of voter mobilization while also reinforcing traditional caste identities.

Caste-based alliances continue to determine government formations, making caste an unavoidable but evolving factor in Indian democracy.

DISCUSSION

The role of caste in Indian electoral politics has been deeply entrenched for decades, shaping party strategies, voter preferences, and policy decisions. While caste-based mobilization continues to influence elections, emerging trends suggest a gradual transition toward issue-based politics, particularly among younger and urban voters. This section critically examines the complex interplay between caste and democracy, the challenges of caste-driven politics, and the shifting electoral landscape post-2024.

1. Caste and Party Strategies: A Political Necessity?

Political parties, both regional and national, have historically relied on caste-based vote banks to secure electoral victories. However, strategies have evolved over time:

National Parties (BJP & Congress):

The BJP's strategy has been to consolidate Hindu votes across caste lines, using social engineering to appeal to non-dominant OBCs and Dalits while maintaining strong upper-caste support.

Congress, in contrast, has attempted to revive its support among marginalized castes by focusing on economic policies and representation of OBC and Dalit leaders.

Regional Parties (SP, BSP, RJD, DMK):

Caste-based parties such as SP and RJD have continued to rely on core caste groups (Yadavs, Dalits, Muslims, etc.), but their influence has faced challenges as voters increasingly prioritize development over identity politics.

Tamil Nadu's Dravidian parties (DMK, AIADMK) represent a unique model where anti-caste rhetoric and social justice policies have been used as electoral strategies.

2. The Shift Toward Issue-Based Politics: Myth or Reality?

While caste remains a significant electoral factor, recent elections, particularly the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, suggest that a section of voters—especially urban youth and middle-class populations—are beginning to prioritize economic and governance issues over caste identity.

2024 Election Trends:

Voter surveys indicate that rural voters still strongly align with caste-based parties, whereas urban voters are increasingly focusing on job creation, inflation, and education.

The BJP's loss of support among some OBC groups shows that caste-based alliances alone are no longer sufficient; economic dissatisfaction played a role in voter shifts.

Challenges to Issue-Based Voting:

Despite some progress, rural and economically weaker voters continue to rely on caste-based representation, as it is seen as a guarantee for community upliftment and political voice.

Political parties still find caste a more predictable mobilization tool than issue-based appeals, particularly in state elections.

3. Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword in Caste Politics

The rise of social media and digital campaigns has significantly altered how caste-based political mobilization operates.

Positive Impact:

Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube have given marginalized communities a greater voice in political discourse.

Increased access to information has allowed voters to question caste-based rhetoric and demand issue-based governance.

Negative Impact:

Social media has also led to caste-based digital polarization, where political parties create echo chambers, reinforcing identity-based divisions. Misinformation campaigns targeting caste groups have exacerbated caste tensions, sometimes leading to communal conflicts.

4. Caste-Based Coalitions and Government Formation

Despite changing voter preferences, caste-based coalitions remain crucial in government formation:

Pre-Poll and Post-Poll Alliances: Major parties strategically form alliances with regional caste-based parties to secure a winning majority.

2024 Election Example: The Samajwadi Party's resurgence in Uttar Pradesh shows how caste-based alliances continue to play a decisive role in electoral success.

5. The Debate Over Caste-Based Reservations in Politics

The reservation system, originally designed to promote social justice, has been a highly debated topic in electoral politics.

Supporters argue that:

Reservations ensure political representation for marginalized communities.

They help correct historical injustices and systemic discrimination.

Critics argue that:

Reservations have led to vote-bank politics, where parties focus more on caste-based appeasement than governance.

There is a need to reform reservation policies to focus on economic rather than caste-based criteria.

Caste politics in India continues to evolve, with both continuity and change shaping electoral outcomes. While caste remains a decisive factor, new trends indicate a gradual transition toward issue-based politics, particularly among urban voters. However, caste-based alliances and vote banks continue to dominate rural areas and influence government formations. The role of social media in reshaping caste discourse presents both opportunities and challenges, requiring further study to assess its long-term impact on Indian democracy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Caste remains one of the most influential factors in Indian electoral politics, shaping voter behavior, party strategies, and policy decisions. While India has witnessed economic and social transformations, caste-based political mobilization continues to determine election outcomes, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The rise of caste-based regional parties, affirmative action policies, and caste-based coalition politics have reinforced caste identities in elections.

However, recent trends, particularly in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, indicate a gradual shift in voter preferences. While caste remains a dominant force, economic issues, governance, and leadership appeal are beginning to influence electoral choices. The increasing engagement of young and urban voters suggests that issue-based politics may play a greater role in the future. Additionally, social media has emerged as a powerful tool in political mobilization, both strengthening caste-based narratives and encouraging political discourse beyond caste identities.

Despite these changes, caste-based alliances remain crucial for government formation, and parties continue to adjust their strategies to accommodate caste demographics. The challenge lies in balancing caste-based representation with governance priorities, ensuring inclusive political participation while reducing caste-driven electoral polarization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To move towards a more issue-based and inclusive democracy, the following measures can be considered:

1. Strengthening Issue-Based Politics

Political parties should focus on developmental agendas, such as employment, education, and healthcare, rather than solely relying on caste mobilization.

Voter awareness programs should encourage informed voting based on governance performance rather than caste identity.

Electoral and Policy Reforms

Reassessing Reservation Policies: A debate on economic-based reservations alongside caste-based reservations can be encouraged to ensure fair

opportunities for marginalized communities. Stronger Election Commission Regulations: Political parties should be monitored for excessive caste-based campaigning to prevent divisive electoral politics.

2. Social Media Regulation and Awareness

While social media empowers communities, it can also fuel caste-based political polarization. Stricter regulations on misinformation and targeted caste-based propaganda are necessary.

Digital literacy campaigns should promote critical thinking among voters to prevent the spread of fake news and caste-based political narratives.

3. Encouraging Youth and Urban Voter Participation

Urban and youth voters, who are more inclined towards issue-based voting, should be further engaged in electoral discourse through debates, policy discussions, and youth leadership programs. Political parties should actively promote young leaders from diverse social backgrounds to create a more inclusive political landscape.

Final Thoughts

While caste-based politics is deeply embedded in India's electoral system, changing socio-economic conditions, digital influence, and urbanization indicate that Indian democracy is evolving. By implementing progressive electoral reforms, strengthening issue-based politics, and leveraging social media for positive engagement, India can move towards a more inclusive and governance-focused democracy, reducing caste-driven electoral polarization while ensuring fair representation.

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