

Electoral Behaviour and Gender in India: Changing Patterns of Women's Voting Participation

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Abstract:

Women's participation in electoral politics in India has undergone a significant transformation, particularly since the 1990s. This study explores the trend of women's voting and investigates the changing electoral behaviour and political agendas of female voters. The study is based exclusively on secondary data, including gender-disaggregated electoral statistics from the Election Commission of India, National Election Studies (NES) data available through Lokniti-CSDS, and relevant scholarly literature. The study examines the gender gap in voter turnout and analyses the factors contributing to women's increased participation recently. Previous studies have found female literacy, media exposure, political awareness, campaign participation and self-empowerment processes to be significant factors in explaining the increase in female turnout (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015). The study concludes that the historical gap in turnout between men and women has significantly decreased and women have become a growing force in the electorate. This shift is an important aspect of an ongoing feminisation of Indian electoral politics (Kapoor, M., & Ravi, S., 2014). Nevertheless, there is no proportional representation of women in political parties and legislative bodies in relation to an increase in electoral participation. The study findings indicate that women's participation in elections is associated with increased electoral agency, but that there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve gender equality in political representation.

Keywords: Women voters; Electoral behaviour; Gender; Voter turnout; Political participation; Political agency

1. Introduction & Theoretical Background

The landscape of electoral politics in India has changed considerably in the last few decades, with women playing pivotal roles. While women had the same formal rights to vote from the outset of the Republic, their voting rates were much lower than men for many decades. However, the gender gap in voter turnout has closed over the years, especially since the 1990s. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, women's turnout was marginally higher than men's for the first time, and the trend continued in 2024 as well. In 2024,

65.78% of female electors voted, compared with 65.55% of male electors. (Election Commission of India, 2025).

An explanation for the changing pattern might lie in the self-empowerment hypothesis, which correlates political participation with rising levels of literacy, political awareness, exposure to the media, and personal power (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015). A complementary perspective based on information and material resources suggests that greater access to information and material resources enables political participation. However, the situation is complicated by the Indian case, where the participation of women in the electoral process has increased even as their participation in the labour force has remained low (Kumar, 2024).

Therefore, the voting behaviour of women should not be treated as a reflection of the preferences of the household or man. The growing evidence indicates that there has been an increase in electoral agency, while the participation in the polling booth has progressed at a much faster rate than women's participation in other political activities and formal political representation.

2. Review of Literature

Kumar and Gupta (2015) relied on the electoral statistics in aggregate terms, coupled with Census data and the evidence of the National Election Study (NES) for 2004, 2009, and 2014, to examine the changing trends in the turnout of women in the elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assembly in India. They found that women's participation increased significantly and studied the issue of self-empowerment, female literacy, exposure to media and interest in politics, and participation in political campaigns as potential factors. Their study is important since it relates to other shifts in political consciousness and political power among women (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015).

Kapoor and Ravi (2014) examined the participation of women in State Assembly elections in India from 1962 to 2012. They identified a gradual improvement in the voter sex ratio from 715 women voters to 883 women voters per 1000 men voters in the 2000s as compared to the 1960s. They found that the increase was due to more females, rather than fewer males. They also said that women may be agents of change, as their voting choices may differ from men's (Kapoor, M., & Ravi, S., 2014).

Rai (2017) introduced the concept of "silent feminization" in electoral politics, suggesting that increased female participation in elections leads to a more feminized political landscape. In elections, as more women participate, the political landscape becomes increasingly feminized. His analysis revealed that the turnout of women in the 2014 Lok Sabha election was at a historic high, and women were also becoming more visible in election campaigning. But he pointed out a significant paradox: a rise in women's turnout as voters did not match the proportional representation of women in political parties and legislatures. Thus, Rai separated the feminization of the electorate from the feminization of political power (Rai, 2017).

Spary (2020) works on elections in 2019; women voters come into focus in relation to the larger gender politics of Indian elections. It underscored the ongoing disparity between the increasing significance of women's voting power and their weak representation in party nominations. The study is significant because it indicates that the size of the female electorate is not always accompanied by proportionality in the numbers of female candidates or legislators (Spary, 2020).

Deshpande (2024) examines, utilizing 2024 and previous NES data, the focus shifts from whether women participate to how they vote. It explores women's involvement with political parties, especially BJP, and whether this trend is a sign of a new women's constituency developing. This study warns against assuming a homogenized view of women as a political group and offers a sex- and classed analysis of political identities and electoral preferences within the group (Deshpande, 2024).

Together, these studies demonstrate that women's electoral involvement has grown significantly but do not confirm political autonomy or political empowerment in terms of voting or substance.

3. Research Objectives

- i. To examine the changing patterns of women's voting participation in India.
- ii. To analyse the changing electoral behaviour and political agency of women voters in India.

4. Research Methodology

The study is designed for both descriptive and analytical research, which involves examining secondary data exclusively. It relies on the gender-disaggregated electoral statistics made available by the Election Commission of India, including those from the National Lok Sabha elections since 1971, and empirical evidence from Lokniti-CSDS National Election Studies and published scholarly research. The articles were chosen for their obvious relevance to women's electoral participation and voting behaviour, from among those that were peer-reviewed, and were either institutional reports or established research papers. The study is longitudinal and comparative, focusing on the trends of female turnout and the gender gap, as well as on women's participation in politics, institutional mobilization, and female electoral agency.

5. Discussions & Results

5.1 Change in women's voting over time:

The history of women's suffrage in India is an amazing transformation. Prior to the 60s, women were much less active in the electoral process than men were. During the first decades of independence, women were much less active in the electoral process than men were. Social restrictions, low levels of literacy, lack of information about politics, economic dependence, and patriarchal norms hindered women's independent engagement in electoral politics.

The change was more noticeable since the 1990s. The gender bias in voting has consistently reduced across the country, with state assembly elections from 1962 to 2012 showing a consistent reduction in gender bias in voting, proving the trend, according to Kapoor and Ravi's analysis. The ratio of voters to voters' sex has also improved since the 1960s, when there were 715 women voters for every 1,000 men, to 883 in the 2000s. Importantly, the increase in participation was largely due to women and not the decrease in men (Kapoor, M., & Ravi, S., 2014).

The late 2000s were also a critical time for understanding the rising participation of women in elections, according to Kumar and Gupta. They found that, as with the 2004/09 shift, the 2009/14 shift was correlated with rising literacy, political awareness, media exposure, and women's increased interest in politics (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015).

This change should not be considered a simple administrative improvement to voter registration, however. It marks a shift in women's engagement with electoral politics and is part of a wider transformation in women's relationships with electoral politics.

5.2 Gender turnout gap closing and reversing;

The key signpost of shifting voting patterns is its reduction in the gender gap in voting turnout. The ECI said that only 55.82% of the women cast their votes in the 2009 Lok Sabha election, while 60.24% of men cast their votes, which shows a gender gap of 4.42 percent. The gender disparity was narrowed to 1.46 percentage points in 2014 when the female turnout reached 65.54% and the male turnout was 67.00%. In 2019, the proportion of female voters (67.18%) was marginally higher than the proportion of male voters (67.02%). Female turnout was 65.78% in 2024, while male turnout was 65.55% (Election Commission of India, 2025).

Table 1: Gender-wise Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections, 2009–2024

Lok Sabha Election	Female Turnout (%)	Male Turnout (%)	Gender Gap
2009	55.82	60.24	4.42
2014	65.54	67.00	1.46
2019	67.18	67.02	-0.16
2024	65.78	65.55	-0.23

Source: Election Commission of India

In the above table turnout excludes postal ballots; gender gap is calculated as male voter turnout minus female voter turnout. Negative values indicate that female turnout exceeded male turnout. The 2024 ECI national turnout figures exclude Surat.

The significance of this trend is considerable. Women are as likely as men to vote in parliamentary elections.

The ECI's 2024 Atlas also notes that women made up 48.62% of registered voters, as opposed to 48.09% in 2019. The percentage of female voters compared to male voters also increased, rising from 926 to 946 per 1,000 in 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2025).

So, two things are occurring: Women are a larger percentage of the electorate, and their turnout is rising in comparison to men.

5.3 Turning point and consolidation in 2019 and 2024:

For the first time, women recorded a higher turnout rate than men in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. This wasn't happening at just one school. This trend continued in 2024, indicating that the turnaround was not just a short-term fluke in the electoral landscape.

In 2024, the ECI has explicitly mentioned that women had a higher turnout than men, which is happening for the second time in the history of the Lok Sabha elections (Election Commission of India, 2025).

The geographical distribution is also important. The Dhubri parliamentary constituency in Assam recorded the highest female voter turnout (92.17%) in 2024, followed by Tamluk in West Bengal (87.57%) (Election Commission of India, 2025).

This data contradicts the view that increased female turnout is a feature of more economically developed or urban areas. Women can be well-represented in communities that are predominantly rural and have poorer socio-economic status.

They had noticed earlier that there was a reduction in gender bias in the traditionally less developed states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh (Kapoor, M., & Ravi, S., 2014).

This means that with such a pattern, economic modernization is not sufficient to account for it.

5.4 Self-empowerment, political awareness, literacy:

The self-empowerment hypothesis is one such explanation. This view sees literacy, access to information, and political awareness gains as women's empowerment and their ability and willingness to participate independently.

Kumar and Gupta established some connections between things that made women more likely to turn out and their literacy, political knowledge, exposure to media, political interest, and involvement in campaign activities (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015).

Recent studies indicate a positive correlation between women's turnout and their political knowledge and media exposure. The Indian case is theoretically interesting, though, because even though female labour-force participation has historically remained relatively low compared with men, even as women's electoral participation has increased. Therefore, the conventional model of resources-based explanations is inadequate (Kumar, 2024).

This suggests that women can achieve political empowerment through means apart from employment. Women's political information can be increased by television, mobile communication, political campaigning, welfare programs, self-help networks, community organizations, and direct interaction with political parties.

When women are unable to exercise their political voice in public arenas, the ability of those women to independently access polling stations becomes an important aspect of political agency.

5.5 The institutional role of the Election Commission

After the 2009 elections, the Election Commission of India highlighted the issue of the gender gap in electoral participation as one of the major issues to be addressed. This led to an emphasis in its Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme on raising voter awareness and closing the gender participation gap (Election Commission of India, n.d.).

It's a curious timing. The increase in female turnout coincided with the ECI's enhanced voter education and mobilisation initiatives. Carnegie's analysis further reveals that the improvement in female attendance starts in 2009 but reminds us that multiple institutional factors are at work and that none is solely responsible for the change (Kumar, 2024).

The ECI's institutional initiatives involve voter awareness, voter registration, support at polling stations and campaigns targeting unrepresented populations. These measures help overcome certain logistical and informational obstacles which have traditionally limited women's involvement.

Therefore, it is important to view the changing behaviour of women voters in light of the interaction between individual agency and institutional facilitation, instead of either one or the other.

5.6 Household influence versus individual political agency:

An important one is whether the higher turnout really translates into women making their own political decisions.

Indian women's political presence has been influenced by their household systems. The impact of family members, especially male family members, on political information, party identification and electoral preferences has been observed. Therefore, it is not necessarily a sign of independent voting behaviour if women vote in large numbers.

This is an important distinction. The concept of participation is always about a physical and formal presence, whereas political agency refers to people's actual ability to create and implement political decisions.

There is mounting evidence that there is a progressive shift toward more agency – but not yet. In his 2024 research, Deshpande asks the question of whether women vote primarily as women and if an autonomous women's constituency has developed. The study takes advantage of the multiple election cycles of NES to shift the analytical focus from turnout to the political content of women's votes (Deshpande, 2024).

A methodological warning is also pertinent: the increase in the number of women voters does not necessarily represent an advancement for women as a unified group, often referred to as "the women's vote". Indian women are not homogenous but are divided by caste, class, religion, region, education, age, rural-urban residence and political affiliation.

Thus, the idea of a uniform female electorate should be considered with caution.

5.7 Women as an increasingly important electoral constituency

Despite internal differences, the growing numerical importance of women has altered electoral competition.

Women are no longer a "peripheral electoral category" in politics. With the increase in women's participation, the strategies for the electoral process must now focus on women's concerns, welfare, security, health, education, household economic condition, etc.

The survey of 6,348 women in 11 states conducted by the Lokniti-CSDS and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in 2019 is important evidence of the growing political involvement of women in India. The survey focused on women's participation and attitudes to politics and highlighted that women's participation in formal political careers was still significantly more challenging (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019).

There is a basic contradiction in the findings: women have increasingly been gaining influence as voters, but they are far less visible as candidates, party workers and political decision-makers.

This situation is the “silent feminisation” of electoral politics, which is how Rai has dubbed the phenomenon. Women's representation as voters grew significantly, but women's representation in political parties and legislative bodies was not high (Rai, 2017).

The importance of women to the electoral process has not yet been adequately reflected in political participation.

5.8 Welfare politics and women's electoral preferences:

Women's political influence has also grown, shaping the political impact of welfare policies targeting women and households.

There have been recent studies on the impact of government welfare programmes on women's voting preferences. In fact, Deshpande's 2024 study focuses on the changing trends in women's party affiliations and BJP support over the years of successive elections and not on women's votes on gender alone (Deshpande, 2024).

Theoretically significant development. Women can form an electorally influential constituency in a context where they judge governments based on welfare delivery, household economic security, public services, and gender-specific programmes, even without a common ideological stance.

Not all women vote for a given party, but political parties of all kinds increasingly see women as electorally consequential.

This is in line with the general trend from women as housekeepers to women as political citizens.

5.9 Safety and accessibility as determinants of women's participation:

The physical conditions surrounding elections, such as security at polling booths, are also important factors to consider.

The causal evidence of Divya Singh is particularly helpful. Singh analysed the effect of better security at polling booths on the turnout of women using booth-level data and a regression-discontinuity design. The study revealed there was about a 1.4 percentage-point increase in the female turnout in booths that had a larger likelihood of security treatment. It also discovered consequences of the elections, such as shifts in support for incumbent and corrupt candidates (Singh, 2020).

This evidence indicates that political attitudes are not the only factors explaining women's behaviour in elections. Both institutional safety and the accessibility of elections directly influence participation.

This issue is especially relevant for areas where social insecurity and electoral violence or mobility limitations make it difficult for women to access polling stations.

As such, improvements in electoral administration can help promote substantive political inclusion.

5.10 Participation beyond voting: the continuing gender paradox:

Although women have achieved parity with men in turnout, the wider political participation gap remains. In election day activities, going to elected representatives, attending public meetings and campaigning, women are still lagging behind, according to the synthesis of research conducted by Kumar (Kumar, 2024). This distinction highlights the major paradox in contemporary Indian politics:

Women have made significant progress towards equality in voting but not in more extensive political participation and representation.

The voting booth has therefore become much more gender-inclusive than political parties, legislatures and many other political institutions.

Rai's observation remains relevant; feminisation of the electorate has not seen a parallel feminisation of the political institutions (Rai, 2017).

This means that the increase in the representation of women in politics must therefore be considered a sign of democratic inclusion but not as a sign of the end of gender disparities.

5.11 Objective-wise analytical assessment:

Objective 1: To examine changing patterns of women's voting participation:

The evidence is overwhelming; a fundamental transformation has taken place. The turnout of females rose dramatically from 2009 to 2014; after reaching 67.18% in 2019, it was still higher than the turnout of males, and in 2024, the turnout of females was slightly higher than the turnout of males. There has been a slight decrease in the gender gap from 4.42 percentage points in 2009 to a negative 0.23% in 2024 (Election Commission of India, 2025).

Transformation seems to be the outcome of multiple processes that interact, such as increased literacy, increased political awareness, media penetration, institutional mobilization by ECI, electoral administration, and changes in social norms and increased recognition of women as political citizens.

Objective 2: To analyse changing electoral behaviour and women's political agency:

The evidence does confirm that women have emerged as a growing and important electorate. The evidence, however, does not make the treating of women as a politically homogeneous voting bloc justifiable. Caste, class, religion, region, welfare interests, and party affiliation closely tie feminist sentiments.

However, as the evidence is now emerging, this phenomenon is more a process of increased female electoral agency than of a complete unification of "women's vote." Specifically, the analysis that Deshpande carried out in 2024 will be useful because it takes a detailed look at the possibility that women may now be forming an independent voting bloc and underscores the complexity of gendered voting behaviour (Deshpande, 2024).

The main outcome of the analysis is that Women have emerged as an increasingly important electoral constituency; however, this influence has not yet been reflected in commensurate political representation.

6. Findings of the Study

The analysis demonstrates that women's electoral participation in India has undergone a substantial transformation. The principal findings are as follows:

- i. The historical gender gap in voter turnout has practically disappeared. The percentage of females turning out has increased from 55.82% in 2009 to 65.78% in 2024, reversing the male advantage (Election Commission of India, 2025).

- ii. The trend is not temporary, as women polled better than men in Lok Sabha in 2019 and in 2024 as well (Election Commission of India, 2025).
- iii. The rise is regionally broad: it also occurs in traditionally less developed states and in rural areas (Kapoor, M., & Ravi, S., 2014).
- iv. Women's participation in elections seems to be increasingly related to political awareness and literacy as well as media exposure, but not necessarily (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015).
- v. The ECI's institutional interventions may have contributed to improving voter inclusion, particularly through voter education and mobilisation (Election Commission of India, n.d.).
- vi. Women are an increasingly important electorate that shapes party policies and policy appeals.
- vii. Increased participation has not led to proportional representation in the political sphere. There is a lack of female representation in parties and legislatures (Rai, 2017) (Spary, 2020).
- viii. No single interest group may be presumed to be the sole voice of women. They continue to be influenced by several social and political identities in their electoral decisions (Deshpande, 2024).

7. Suggestions:

The remarkable growth of women's voter participation provides a strong foundation for deeper democratic inclusion. However, the remaining gap between electoral participation and political representation requires sustained institutional and political intervention.

- i. **Strengthen women-focused voter education:** Increase the strength of women's voter education, continue electoral literacy programmes outside of election cycles and focus on independent political decision-making.
- ii. **Make elections accessible and safe:** The electoral environment should be secured and made accessible, especially in challenging-to-reach or vulnerable areas, and it should be gender sensitive.
- iii. **Beyond voting, promote women's participation in campaigns, public gatherings, consultations and local political organisations, through facilitation by political parties and civil-society organisations.**
- iv. **Enhance the gender representation within political parties:** Parties are to implement transparent recruitment, training and promotion of women candidates.
- v. **Increase gender-disaggregated electoral data collection:** The electoral data of NES/ECI should be analysed in terms of caste, class, age, region, education and rural-urban location in order to analyse the difference among them.
- vi. **Do not presume a unified 'women's vote' in electoral campaigns:** develop campaign messages that reflect the diversity of women's political preferences and take into account issues of common concern that disproportionately impact women.

8. Conclusion:

The active involvement of women in elections stands out as one of the most remarkable shifts in the current political landscape in India. Indian women had lower electoral turnout than men for decades due to the patriarchal social structures, lack of political information and mobility, and economic dependence. But since the 1990s, the historical trend has significantly altered. The evidence demonstrates a substantial

narrowing and eventual reversal of the historical gender gap in voter turnout in India. Female turnout increased from 55.82% in 2009 to 65.54% in 2014 and reached 67.18% in 2019, when it marginally exceeded male turnout of 67.02% for the first time. In 2024, female turnout declined slightly to 65.78% but remained above male turnout at 65.55%. Thus, the most appropriate conclusion is not that women's turnout has increased continuously, but that the long-standing gender gap in electoral participation has largely disappeared and has marginally reversed in the last two Lok Sabha elections (Election Commission of India, 2025).

This change is multi-faceted. Women's political agency is growing as a result of enhanced literacy and exposure to the media and increased awareness of their political rights and responsibilities, and it is also facilitated by institutional changes such as electoral reforms and ECI initiatives (Kumar, S., & Gupta, P., 2015). Finally, the evidence on the security of polling stations further shows how the conditions of institutions can directly impact women's participation (Singh, 2020). However, the feminization of voting does not mean the actual feminization of Indian politics. The representation of women in political parties and legislatures is still low, and the level of women's involvement in various forms of regular politics has not yet reached the same level as men (Rai, 2017) (Kumar, 2024).

The overall picture is thus one of growing electoral representation for women, despite the lack of institutional representation. Women are not just a 'marginal electoral category' but now a politically significant one that can affect electoral results. However, the concept of a 'women's vote' is analytically problematic, as women's votes cross-cut caste, class, religion, region, and other identities (Deshpande, 2024). Thus, the overall finding of this study is that there has been a significant democracy of women's participation at the ballot box in India, but there is a need for further gender democratisation to move from electoral participation to sustained political voice, political representation, and decision-making power for women.

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