

Caste and Character of Candidates, Political Patronage and Voting Behavior in India

Ahmed Usman

University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Shabbir Hussain

Government Degree College for Boys Pindi Bhattian, Pakistan.

Muhammad Usman

Planning and Development Department, Government of Punjab

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a range of possible factors that limit the effectiveness of elections in India as a mechanism to elect the candidates who are politically honest and competent. In this regard, caste affiliations of the candidates and ineffective role played by political parties, public offices and different electoral bodies are some of the major factors that limit the effectiveness of electoral process. Social ties and networking between the candidates and the voters based on common caste is the strongest factor that gives birth to undesirable outcomes for a democratic system. Provision of patronage to the general public by the candidates is the other major factor to win political clientage during election process. This article helps to understand the significant role of political patronage provided by the candidates in determining the voting behavior of masses during electoral process in India.

Key Words: Caste, Political Patronage, Voting Behavior, Elections, India

Introduction

The present study investigates the secondary data published on the topic of political participation, candidates' caste and character, political patronage and voting behavior in India. Voting behavior and patronage involved in political participation are the major themes of the study. Furthermore, the effect of caste and character of the candidate on voting behavior are also explored. The researchers browsed through a number of studies conducted on the topic of political participation, candidate's caste, character and patronage, which indicated that political participation in India is a complex phenomenon mainly because of the fact that India is inhibited by multi-ethnic groups exhibiting different social values (Bouton, 2014; Dirks, 2011). These social values along with structural forces determine the behavior of people to vote for specific candidates (Kohli, 2014; Roy, 2014).

Character of the Candidates and Voting Behavior

According to theoretical assumptions of voting and political participation by masses, the basic purpose of the election is to elect those candidates who are positive in terms of their political character and dealings in their social life (Hyde & Marinov, 2012). Under strict scrutiny, competitive elections and attractive incentives for electoral officers and officials, it is tried to achieve that very goal (Elmendorf & Schleicher, 2013). But, in reality, this is not true. When contesting election, a significant number of candidates who are corrupt or who had criminal records won their seats (Banerjee et al., 2014).

The number of candidates who had criminal record is relatively higher in India. According to the Association for Democratic Reform (2012), 403 candidates out of 575 had any type of criminal record including criminal allegation, official misconduct, criminal background and criminal charges in 2007 elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Ironically, out of these 403 candidates, 140 candidates were elected successfully. The game was not over, in 2012, 759 candidates who contested election had criminal charges. Out of these 759 candidates, 189 candidates were successful by winning their assembly seats.

The success of these candidates was largely because of the patronage they received from their political parties, public offices and election contesting bodies. Public officials provide patronage to such candidates by exercising different types of corrupt activities. Only public officials are not found corrupt in this regards, many of such contesting candidates also exhibited corruption i.e. hiding assets but under the patronage of election contesting bodies (Graaf et al., 2010). Despite these criminal records i.e. embezzlement of public funds, candidates were successful in winning their assembly seats. (Yadav, 2014)

When explaining the success of such candidates, Horowitz (1985) claims that the trend of voters' voting behavior plays crucial role here. Ethnic identities change the attitude and behavior of the voters to vote for those candidates who belong to their own ethnic group or identity. Voters' ethnic ties with candidates and political parties force them to not bother about the character of the candidates or the manifesto of political party (Gerber et al., 2010). In this way, criminal and bad reputed candidates get favor from the people of their ethnic group. In such cases, the performance and qualification of the candidates become less important to change the voters' behavior (Banerjee et al., 2014).

There are many voters, who are not always poor, try to get material benefits when electing candidates. They are less likely to pay attention to the character of the candidates i.e. either well reputed or bad reputed. These voters' aim to gain more and more material benefits (Johnson, 2003). In such cases, the payment made to voters by contesting candidates is important which is commonly known as vote buying. These practices are sponsored by some political parties too (Banerjee et al., 2011). In this way, voters become less concerned about the character of candidate, policy stances and party manifesto. Similar results are compiled by Banerjee et al. (2014) in India. They claim that the poor voters in India do not give

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importance to the repute of the candidate because of the lack of better alternative and lack of information regarding the character of the candidate and patronage provided by them.

Caste and Voting Behavior

India is a country inhibited by multiple religions and ethnic groups. Besides religious and ethnic groups, there are various castes living in India. Social ties and networking between the candidates and the voters based on common caste is the strongest factor to give birth to desirable outcomes when contesting in election (Banerjee et al., 2014). Caste affects the voting behavior of people to support any candidate. In different parts of the South Asia including India, caste binds people with each other to enhance homogeneity. These homogeneous groups are found to support only those candidates who belong to their own caste and those who hold power and authority as well. Sometimes election is contested by more than one candidate who belong to same caste group, however, those holding power and authority get breakthrough in election (Betancourt & Gleason, 2000).

There are scholars who believe that caste system determines the boundaries of social divisions. Social divisions that are based on caste system are more severe. Some castes are ranked at higher social position than others (Banerjee et al., 2010). This caste system also provides the bases to division of labor i.e. lower castes adopt lower and secondary professions and higher castes adopt prestigious professions, and political labor i.e. clear difference between those who rule and those who are being ruled (Beteille, 2012). Those ranked lower are not allowed to contest election because they cannot provide social protection net (patronage) to their voters and they are not from prestigious families. But they themselves need patronage and social protection. In this way, the caste system in India determines the social positions to elect and to be elected (Chandra, 2007).

Political Patronage and Voting Behavior

Patronage is the dynamic process to determine voting behavior of the people around the world and especially in India. This patronage gives birth to collective action i.e. social movement and social networking which in turn determines the behavior of masses to vote for either one candidate or the other (Heller, 1996). One of the factors to explain the success of ethnic candidates in India are their ethnic ties with local people which create social protection net for those who are voting to these candidates. In other word, providing patronage is the major factor to win political clientage when contesting election (Chandra, 2007).

It is important to understand the role of patronage and the process through which patronage determines voting behavior. It is not surprising that in India and also in other parts of South Asia, the ratio of success is higher among those candidates who can provide patronage to their voters. There might be religious, ethnic and caste factors which directly or indirectly link both the parties (voters

and candidates) in this process of providing and receiving patronage (Wilkinson, 2007). Some of the candidates only provide patronage to those who belong to their own religious group while filtering out those who do not belong to their religious ideology. Interestingly, their political slogans and manifesto also indicate their intentions to target any specific group by trying to establish their connection with masses (Lipner, 2012). There are very popular sayings when convincing to vote by such candidates i.e. our relationship is not new, it is established by our ancestors, we are from caste, it is our area, they are outsider, they are external, we are internal etc. (Wilkinson, 2005).

The question here is why these sentences are repeated again and again by the candidates when approaching voters. One of the possible answers is the role of patronage provided by such candidates or their ancestors, when voters approach them for help in any matter (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2009). They are ready to help them out but not with the passion that it is their very duty but because they can use this chance of patronage as an opportunity to gain votes when contesting in elections (Auyero, 1999).

Interestingly, there are also cases when candidates fear to lose their reputation in their constituency or when voters try to escape from their patronage, the majority of the candidate use different tricks to kept them under their patronage i.e. by providing different facilities, jobs, material gains, sanitation and roads construction etc. These are somehow positive tricks which pull voters to vote for such candidates who provide these facilities (Besley et al., 2005).

The previously mentioned tricks are not too negative in their outcome for the voters. But theft of belongings, robberies, false FIRs, dehumanizing the honor of their families, debt, murder attempts and in worst form even killing of innocent people to kept them under patronage is also exercised by political candidates (Wilkinson, 2000). These tricks are negative which push people to vote for such candidate who can provide patronage in such situations. When the victims of such incidents approach political candidates, they first of all realized them that this only happened because they were not under his/her patronage. In such situations, voters become forced to vote for them in order to gain their patronage to assure personal and social security (Chaturvedi, 2005).

Conclusion

From the above debate, it becomes clear that the voting behavior in India is a complex phenomenon. Attributes of candidate and voting behavior by masses are interrelated. Social attributes of candidate i.e. caste and character of candidates and patronage provided by candidate pull and push voters to vote for either candidate. In other words, political participation in India is the interplay of caste and character of and patronage by the contesting candidates. Caste and character influence the level of patronage provided by any candidate and create links and networking between the candidate and the voters. However, this is the traditional

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way to vote which requires immediate interventions to elect well reputed, honored and qualified candidates.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Ahmed Usman is working as Assistant Professor at the Institute of Social & Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Shabbir Hussain is working as Lecturer of Sociology at Government Degree College for Boys Pindi Bhattian and is PhD Scholar at the Institute of Social & Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Muhammad Usman is working as Research Associate at Planning and Development Department, Government of Punjab and is PhD Scholar at the Institute of Social & Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.
