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Media Influence on Voting Patterns: Analysing Urban-Rural Differentials

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The urban population in India is estimated at 31.3% according to the 2011 census with an estimated rate of urbanisation for 2010-2015 being 2.47% annually. But in the recent times, much of India's hinterland has gone through a major transformation as reflected in the latest consumption data put out by the National Sample Survey Office. For the first time, more than 50% of the increased rural spending is on non-food products and services, including mobile phones and television sets. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, as of June 2013, India had 873 million mobile connections. TRAI reported that there were 842.34 million active connections in the month of January 2015. Of these nearly 522 million were in urban areas, with the remaining 351 million in rural areas. There are 46 million active Internet users in rural India, according to an i-Cube report, titled "Internet in Rural India", published by lobby group Internet and Mobile Association of India and IMRB, a market research firm. More than 70% of India's population lives in the rural areas and yet, the connectivity of telephone and internet is poor. This obvious digital divide includes the issue of lack of literacy, infrastructure and skills in the rural areas. It may be pointed out also that this digital divide is not just on the rural-urban front but also includes gender, age, culture, language and other variables.

On the political front, India is a federal parliamentary democratic republic and the most populous democracy in the world. In the year 2009, the elections involved an electorate of 714 million which further increased to 814.5 million in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Such large electorate mandates led us to hold that the election in 3 phases. The 2014 Lok Sabha election conducted in nine phases was the longest election span to be held in Indian history.

It is interesting to note that there has been an emergence of regional players like Samajwadi party, Lok Dal, Bahujan Samaj Party, Akali Dal, TDP, Janata Dal, RJD, DMK, AIADMK and many others across India. These parties are based on regional aspirations and are strongly influenced by caste considerations. All modern democracies operate on the basis of representation and these representatives are chosen through free and fair elections. The spirit of a citizen of a democratic nation is participation through voting as an important political act (Anderson & Stephenson, 2010). The most interesting questions about an election are not concerned with who won but with such questions as why people voted the way that they did or what were the implications of the results.

One of the major concerns that characterize the study of electoral behaviour is explaining the election result by identifying the sources of individual voting behaviour which means attempting to understand the election outcome by understanding how the voters made up their minds. A number of attitudinal and social factors are related to individual voting behaviour. Among attitudinal factors, assessments of the personal characteristics of the candidates, evaluations of government performance, orientations on specific policy issues, party identification, and ideology may be some of the primary determinants of candidate choice. For social factors, race, religion, region, social class and caste appear to be the characteristics that have most closely related to voting over the past several decades. Examining how these factors are related to the vote in particular elections not only explains the election outcome, but also can provide with an understanding of electoral dynamics (Prysby & Scavo, 2004). All election campaigns seek to lure maximum voters in their favour in order to be able to win seats in the Parliament. A section of voters who are ignorant of politics and worldly affairs are susceptible to political manipulation. They are easily misled by politicians

and are incapable of electing the leaders based on the nation's best interest. This can be traced to the deluge of unprecedented access to information with the actual consumption of it because only a small percentage of people take advantage of the great new resources at hand (Shenkman, 2008). In a study about Franklin D. Roosevelt's election campaign and the effects of media messages, the magic bullet theory was disproved establishing that audiences are not passive receivers of the messages by the media and added that interpersonal messages are more influential than media messages (Lazarsfield, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). However, the effects of media cannot be treated as a general phenomenon. The diversity in the content and form of the media affects different audience differently. It also depends on how much and how well is the public informed. The more informed the public, the less is the effect of media on them (McQuail, 1979).

Family is the most important source of partisanship. When deciding how to vote, decisions take place within a social context. Variations in that context affect the voting pattern. A politically homogeneous circle of friends or co-workers can lead to strongly held partisan views. Moreover, it is generally preferred to be with friends and co-workers who reinforce existing biases. Families also tend to have similar views and mass media further reinforces these existing biases due to selective media consumption. Thus, campaigns rarely change views; they merely reinforce the original views. It may be inferred that media and campaigns have minimal effect on voting behaviour (Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee, 1954).

Social scientists associate urbanisation with modern societies and it is often presumed that it is an important variable in understanding political change. But, it is necessary to look at alterations in traditional patterns of human interactions. These alterations are not restricted to urban environments (Schoultz, 1972). Urbanism as a way of life is not restricted to the areas which are regarded as 'urban'. The urban life-style is increasingly diffusing and urbanism is radiating its influence outward (Anderson, 1960).

Wirth (1938) also observed that urbanisation has brought about profound changes in almost every phase of social life but while city is the characteristic locus of urbanism, the urban mode of life is not confined to the cities. For sociological purposes, a city is a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals. This leads to individual variability,

the relative absence of interpersonal acquaintance, segmentation of human relations which are largely transitory, anonymous and superficial. He observes that heterogeneity breaks down rigid social structures and produces increased mobility, insecurity and instability. The individual becomes effective only as he acts through organised groups. Hence, the complicated phenomena of urbanism may acquire coherence if the sociological analysis proceeds in the light of such a body of theory. On the other hand, Lerner (1958) concludes that urbanisation leads to reduction of illiteracy and higher consumption of media which leads to more intensive political participation. According to Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960), changes in party identification are rare and occur as a result of events of greater changes. Such changes occur at an individual level when there are adjustments in the social status of the subjects or when changes occur in the broader field of social or political organisation. However, Popkin(1994) bases rational choices between candidates on low information rationality of the voters. The voters gain such low information rationality in their daily lives through media and through personal interactions to evaluate candidates and facilitate electoral choices. It is also argued that most information voters learn about politics is picked up as a by-product of activities and pursued as a part of their daily life. Media helps to explain what the politicians are doing and the relevance of their actions while campaigns help to clarify issues. Voters develop affinity towards like-minded opinion leaders whether in media or in personal interactions. Interpersonal communication is seen as a way of developing assessments about parties and candidates. Information received from the media is discussed among peers and helps create opinions. Voters often function as clinicians who gather limited information and infer from it a broader narrative instead of as statisticians who weigh only facts in order to make a decision. Election outcomes are in substantial part responsive towards objective changes occurring under the incumbent party. They are not irrational or random or solely a product of past loyalties or of campaign rhetoric (Kramer, 1971). Thus, the most important dimension is who people vote for and how they make that decision.

In the backdrop of these arguments this study attempts to examine the voting preferences in two villages on the basis of their proximity to an urban centre. The purpose is to assess the differences in these voting preferences and the influence of media on the same.

Review of Literature

There are several studies conducted on electoral behaviour and voting patterns, and what influences the political decisions made by the voters. Most studies conducted in the United States have studied the impact of media on voters during Presidential elections. Some of them have been highlighted here as they give an understanding of the variables of media use and voting patterns.

In a study conducted by Seth C. McKee in 2008 titled 'Rural Voters and the Polarisation of American Presidential Elections', it was revealed that there is a considerable impact of place on politics. The social networks that exist in the rural and urban places are markedly different and this is reflected in the economic, religious, racial and political differences between the urban and rural voters, and that their political preferences were greatly divergent. Similar observations were made in a study conducted by Martin Plesivcak titled 'The Regional Dimension of the Socio-Political Urban-Rural Conflict in Slovakia'. The nature of electoral support manifested by rural and urban electorates were significantly different in several regions of south and south-western Slovakia. But they were also similar in certain regions of eastern Slovakia.

Another study by Andrei V. Berezkin, Mikhail Myagkov and Peter C. Ordeshook in 1999 on 'The Urban-Rural Divide in the Russian Electorate and the Effect of Distance from Urban Centers' refines the interpretation of the urban-rural cleavage in Russian politics. Apart from relying on the variables of age, education and economic opportunities between urban and rural areas, it also considered the influence of local and regional political bosses. It was found that at least a part of the urban-rural cleavage appeared to be the consequence of such political bosses at the region's centre.

In 1982, a study was conducted by Lee B. Becker and Sharon Dunwoody called 'Media Use, Public Affairs Knowledge and Voting in a Local Election' which drew a relationship between knowledge about public affairs and media use. The finding was that newspapers were the most common sources of political information and that those who obtained their information from newspapers were more knowledgeable than those dependent on other sources. It also concluded that knowledge was an intermediary link between media use and voting behaviour. Churchill L. Roberts conducted a study on 'Media

Use and Making of Political Decisions' in 1976 which concluded that increased media usage, particularly newspapers, at the time of elections leads to higher level of political participation which accelerates the process of decision-making. On the contrary, low involvement with media leads to lesser political information. This leads to slower development of distinct attitude towards the different candidates and hence, greater difficulty in making a voting decision.

In the same year, Marilyn Jackson Beeck conducted a panel study called 'Interpersonal and Mass Communication in Children's Political Socialisation'. It established a relationship between communication and political socialisation. It also revealed that sex did not alter this relationship, and that interpersonal communication was less important in political socialisation than mass media. In a study conducted by Gary Kebbel on 'Importance of political activity in explaining Multiple News Media Use', it was found that sex, age, income and education were correlated with media use. Men had more multiple media use than women, the older used media more frequently than the younger as did the more educated compared to less educated.

Berelson et al. in their 1954 study titled 'Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign' examined the factors that make people vote the way they do. Carried out during the 1948 presidential campaign, one of its finding shows that voting decisions take place within a social context and that media and campaigns have a minimal effect on the voting behaviour. They observe that many voters vote not for principle in the usual sense but for a group to which they are attached. They do not support electoral decisions on reason. However, they also argue that the democracies have become stronger because of this. If all voters had high degree of knowledge and political motivation, that would lead to a greater division among voters and lead to greater political cleavage and antagonism which could threaten the system itself. Rather than individuals who are highly motivated and interested in politics, a democracy needs heterogeneous groups to ensure plurality of ideas and political proposals.

In the light of the above scholarly studies, the theoretical framework for this research suggests that one has to look at a sociological approach to understand the nature of relationships between groups. In this context it is important to understand some theories emphasizing on social participation.

'Primary Groups' are small social groups which share close, personal and enduring relationships. They are categorised by intimate face-to-face association and co-operation. Within a primary group, the process of socialisation begins; an individual starts becoming a social being from within the primary group he/she belongs to. Attitudes, behaviour, beliefs, and social identity are shaped and nurtured within the primary group (Cooley, 1909).

The changing nature of social participation was given in a model elaborated by Robert Redfield referred to as the 'folk urban continuum' He speculated regarding the significant changes from the folk to the urban end based on studies conducted by Yucatan during the early 1930s. According to this perspective, as communication moves from folk to the urban end of the continuum, there occurs shift from cultural intimacy and organisation to disorganisation, a shift from collective or community orientation to individualism. Folk society is traditional and spontaneous and leads similar lifestyle while modern civilisation is loosely integrated. A cultural change is seen depending on the varying degree of contact with civilisation and it differently affects the folk culture. The 'hypodermic needle theory' implies that mass media has a direct, immediate and powerful effect on its audiences. The mass media in the 1940s and 1950s were perceived as a powerful influence on behaviour change. Also known as 'magic bullet theory', it suggests that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly by 'shooting' or 'injecting' them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Modernization theory is a description and explanation of the processes of transformation from traditional or underdeveloped societies to modern societies. Lerner's (1958) empirical studies in several Middle Eastern societies identified empathy, the capacity to take the perspective of others, as a product of media, literacy, and urbanization and as a vital ingredient in producing rational individual behaviour conducive to societal development. To be a modern individual, one must be able to empathise with others.

The mass media plays crucial role in the modernisation process. The more exposed people are to media, the greater is their capability to imagine themselves as strange persons in strange situations, places and time than did people in any previous historical epoch (Lerner, 1958). The 'Two Step Flow Theory' examines the influence of media messages. The influence of social

groups to which the individual belongs has a crucial effect on the voting decisions. The opinion leaders pay close attention to the mass media and receive its message. They pass on this media content and in addition their own interpretation as well. The term 'personal influence' was coined to refer to the process intervening between media's direct message and the audience's reaction to the same. Opinion leaders are similar to those they influence and hence, are more influential in getting people to change their voting behaviour and attitude. This explains why certain media campaigns have failed to influence their audience's attitude and behaviour (Lazarsfeld, et al. 1944).

'Media System Dependency Theory' states that the more a person depends on media to meet needs, the more important media will be in a person's life, and therefore the more effects media will have on a person. But dependency on all media is not equal. It depends on two factors. First, a person tends to depend more on a media which fulfils various needs than the one which fulfils only a few. The other factor is social stability. When the social conflicts are high and established institutions and practices are challenged, people are forced to re-evaluate their choices and this increases their reliance on mass media. During stable times, such reliance on media may decrease (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Blumler and Katz's 'Uses and Gratification Theory' suggests that media users play an active role in choosing and using the media. Users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their media use. Theorists say that a media user seeks out a media source that best fulfils the needs of the user. Uses and gratifications assume that the user has alternate choices to satisfy their need (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

The theories discussed here have suggested that media use and political participation have inter-linkages. The study proposes to find out within this theoretical framework of the folk-urban continuum whether media use and political participation are complementary. To examine and understand this proposition, the researcher formulated the following specific objectives and hypothesis.

Objectives

1.   To understand the demographic profile of the two villages and

compare them on the dimensions of gender, age, religion, category, income, education and occupation.

2. To evaluate the level of exposure to media in each village and draw a comparison between them.

3. To examine the sources of information of the respondents in both the villages with respect to political information.

4. To assess the level of political awareness of the respondents through a political awareness test and assess whether the level of media exposure is related to political awareness.

5. To examine which source of information (interpersonal or media) is influential in formulation of opinion to vote in favour of a particular political party and understand the voting patterns of the two villages drawing comparisons.

6. To study whether the vicinity of the two villages with respect to being near to Delhi has an observable impact in terms of voting patterns.

Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a difference in the voting preference for a political party between the two villages?

2. Is there a difference in the influence of differential media on voting preferences?

3. Does higher level of media exposure lead to voting for a particular party?

Hypothesis

This study hypothesised the following:

1. Village closer to Delhi has higher media exposure and therefore will have higher political awareness.

2. Village closer to Delhi has higher education levels and hence greater level of political awareness

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a survey research design was adopted. Universe for the purpose of this study encompassed all villages within a radius of 100 km radius. Since the research proposes to study one village close to Delhi and the other further away from Delhi, it was decided to select through the method of simple random sampling two villages: one less than 50km and the other above 50km but less than 100km from Delhi.

Kishangarh referred to as Village 1 henceforth which was within a radius of less than 50km and Baroli Chauth, referred to as Village 2, which was more than 50km but less then 100km were selected through the following process.

A census list was obtained in which about 200 villages in 100km radius were listed. All villages up to 50km radius were listed separately and those above 50km but less than 100km were listed separately. A simple random sampling technique was adopted to select the two villages.

Sampling to Select Respondents

To select respondents, systematic random sampling was adopted by choosing every nth person from the electoral roll of the villages as available on the website of the election commission. The population from which samples were taken included only the registered voters from the two villages.

Tool of Survey

A structured questionnaire was used as a tool of the survey. Questions related to their media exposure and voting preferences. A political awareness test was conducted. 50 respondents were selected from each of the two villages, with the total sample size comprising 100 respondents.

Media Use Index

A media use index was set up in terms of the frequency of media usage for newspapers, TV and radio. The frequency was classified as daily, few times a week, few times a month, less often and never. For the purpose of analysing the data, the daily users were given a score of 3 for each of the three mediums. Those who consumed such media few times a week or few times a month

were given a score of 2 and classified as those who 'often' used such media. The less often users were given a score of 1 and seen as rare users and a score of 0 was awarded for 'never'. Such scores for all three media were added up with 9 being the maximum score. Those with a score of 6 or above were seen as media information rich and those scoring 5 or below were media information poor.

Political Awareness Test

The political awareness test constituted a total of 15 questions on technicalities of the elections, current political scenario as well as on some popular legislation. The questions for this purpose were finalised from 50 questions submitted by 15 teachers on political awareness from schools in villages near Delhi. 15 common questions submitted by them were selected to be a part of the final questionnaire that tested political awareness. It was, for most part, a multiple-choice questionnaire and respondents were asked to choose a correct answer. A score of 1 was awarded for each correct answer. Those who scored between 11-15 were classified as having high political awareness, those with 6-10 score were termed as having medium political awareness and those with a score of 0-5 as having low political awareness.

Media Use and Political Awareness

The relationship between media use and political awareness and its effects on voting preferences was examined. The respondents were asked to indicate their main source of information on politics and their source of influence on voting preference.

Operational Definitions For the purpose of this study, the following terms were operationally defined:

- Electoral Behaviour: The attitude of the voters which explains how and why voting decisions are made. It is reflected in the reasons for their voting preference.

- Voting Preference: It is the party that the respondent favours and intends to vote for in elections.

- Media influence: The power of the media, like newspaper, radio and television, to produce an observable response without any apparent

exertion of force. It is reflected in if, how and to what extent the content consumed affect the decisions made by the audience

• Media Use: It is the frequency of use of mass media, like newspapers, radio and television, in terms of daily, few times a week, few times a month, less often and never. These are subsequently analysed as daily, often, rarely and never for the purpose of allotting scores.

• Political Awareness: It is the awareness of the respondents regarding the various political issues and elections in general. It also includes their knowledge regarding important legislations.

After analysing the data the following observations were drawn from this study:

It was found that Village 2 had a greater number of registered female voters than Village I. Age-wise both villages had a majority of their population between the ages of 26-40 years. The working population belonged to the age group of 41-65 years. All the respondents in Village 2 were Hindus whereas in Village 1, majority of the respondents were Hindus but there were respondents belonging to other religions as well. Village 1 had majority of its population belonging to the general category whereas Village 2 had a majority of the respondents belonging to scheduled caste, with general category coming in a close second.

It was observed that with respect to the educational qualifications, the majority of the population in both villages had attained an education level between 6th-12th standard. However, the analysis also showed that Village 1 had more number of graduates than the other village. The education level of the respondents of Village 2 ranged between 1st -5th standard. It was inferred that respondents of Village 1 had a higher education level than Village 2.

A majority of the population in Village 1 were labourers whereas the main occupation of Village 2 was found to be farming. Majority of the respondents of Village 1 had an income level above Rs 4000 a month whereas in Village 2 the income level ranged between Rs 3001-4000. The rest of the respondents had their income level ranging between Rs 2001-3000 per month. It was inferred that income-wise, Village 1 was economically better placed than Village 2.

Media Exposure:

In both the villages, TV was the most widely used medium. Newspapers followed television in terms of use and radio was the least used medium. However, the percentage of radio users was particularly low in Village 2.

It was inferred that the majority of the population in Village 1 was richer in media exposure as compared to Village 2. It was inferred that the level of media exposure was greater in Village 1 as compared to Village 2.

Sources of Information for Political News:

In both Village 1 and Village 2, majority of the respondents watched news and current affairs on TV. However, current affairs programmes were more popular among the respondents of Village 1.

In both villages, respondents tuned to radio to listen to music. However, a small percentage of respondents from Village 1 listened to news and current affairs on radio whereas this is not the case with Village 2.

Respondents of both the villages read about politics in newspapers but while Village 1 the preferred content was national politics. On the other hand, village 2 respondents preferred local or regional politics. Residents of both villages showed interest in their local village news but respondents of Village 1 were also interested in sports. It was observed that sports news was not a priority for Village 2.

Political Awareness:

Majority of the population of both the villages had a medium level of political awareness as per the index drawn to measure their level of political awareness through a test. However, a higher percentage of the respondents of Village 1 had a better level of political awareness than the respondents from Village 2.

Media Exposure and Political Awareness:

It was observed that over all, respondents from both villages had a medium level of political awareness. It was also inferred that Village 1 had a majority of its population as media rich. Also, 46 percent of the respondents

of Village 1 had a high level of political awareness. On the other hand, a majority of Village 2 was media poor with very few respondents having high political awareness. Thus, the hypothesis stating that the village near Delhi had a higher media exposure and therefore higher political awareness was found to be true.

Education and Political Awareness:

From the inference already made above, it can also be concluded that the second hypothesis which states that the village closer to Delhi has a higher education level and hence higher political awareness was also found to be true.

Influence of the media on Voting Preference and Understanding Voting Patterns:

It was observed that majority of the voters in both villages indicated that they would cast their vote in favour of the BJP. However, Village 1 felt that some respondents were loyal supporters for AAP as well whereas this is not the case in Village 2. Hence, in response to the first research question, despite the fact that the same political party enjoyed majority support in both villages, it can be concluded that there is a difference in voting preference between the two. It is also observed that most respondents from Village 1 have made decision of their voting preference based on the information imparted through the mass media. However, in Village 2, interpersonal communication played a larger role in influencing voters' decisions. Hence, a significant difference was observed in the influence of the media on voting preferences of the two villages. The second research question can therefore be answered affirmatively.

In response to the last research question, it is observed that Village 1 has greater media exposure as compared to Village 2, yet majority of both villages were in favour of voting for BJP. Hence, it could be concluded that a higher level of media exposure was not the only factor which led to voting for a particular party. Though both villages predominantly would vote based on the candidate's credentials, a larger percentage of voters from Village 1 were be considering the political parties as well.

Views on Infrastructure and Development:

A major portion of respondents from Village 1 felt that the condition of their village had remained stagnant for the last five years. However, in Village 2, respondents felt that the condition of their village had improved. In both villages, a large proportion of the respondents did not give credit to the current government for improvement in their condition. While most respondents in Village 1 feel that a new government could help improve the condition of their village, a major portion of respondents from Village 2 felt that even a new government would not work much towards improvement in their condition.

Inferences:

The following inferences and conclusions were drawn from the study:

It was inferred that there were differential voting preferences between both the villages. The village with a higher proportion of urban population preferred to vote in favour of different political parties whereas the other village preferred to vote in favour of one particular party. The village closer to Delhi had a major influence of the mass media in deciding to vote in favour of any political party whereas the village further away from Delhi was influenced by their participation through interpersonal communication. The study also indicated higher political awareness among respondents of the village closer to Delhi. There was also a higher use of differential media among the respondents of the village closer to Delhi.

The study substantiates within the theoretical framework of the folk-urban continuum that media use and political participation are complementary. This research also substantiates the two-step flow model of Lazarsfeld where it states that the social groups engage in interpersonal communication for political awareness and voting preferences in the village further away from Delhi. The interplay between media use and political awareness was significantly highlighted in the study.

In the backdrop these inferences it was concluded that there are urban-rural differentials in the patterns of voting behaviour as well as influence of the mass media.

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