

Political Participation in India: A Study of key factors Affecting Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Political systems differ from one society to another; hence, the involvement of people in the political process of the political system may also differ from one society to another. It is not equal in all the political systems. Participation of people in modern democracies is large as compared to the political systems of the ancient times. The involvement of people in the decision making process of the government, i.e. political participation, is duly affected by several important factors. Some of such common factors are psychological factors, socio-economic factors, political factors and situational factors which always influence the people mostly to take part in the decision or policy formation process of the government. The term Political participation covers all kinds of activities which involve the people in shaping and influencing the political decision making process and in the selection of their rulers, casting of votes in elections, making of organized demands on the political system, participating in party politics, participation in political movements, conferences, discussions, strikes and demonstrations, communications with the representatives and other political leaders, involvement in political communication etc. all form part of political participation. Obviously, there are some cogent reasons for this poor turnout. Politics in India has, in recent years, often become a dirty game and this is one of the reasons why many take no interest. Moreover, people often feel that sometimes crime and politics go hand-in-hand and the mafia-dons have polluted the atmosphere by their unholy alliance with the ruling party leaders. But if a large number of people stay away from the polling booths due to so many factors, democracy surely becomes a misnomer. Modern democracy has become an indirect system due to the enlargement of territory and population. So, people's rule through elections has come to the fore. Naturally, it requires the active and full-fledged involvement of the people in electoral affairs.

1. Introduction

Political participation may be defined in various ways. The term 'Political Participation' refers to those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the selection of ruler and directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy. Almond and Powell observe, "Political participation can be defined as the involvement of members of society in the decision-making process." According to Michael Rush and Philip Althoff, "Political participation is the involvement of individuals at various levels in the political systems.

Thus, the term refers to the activity of private citizens to influence government decision-making. Political participation may vary in degree from one society to another, but typically, they include voting and other electoral activities. The term Political participation covers all kinds of activities which involve the people in shaping and influencing the political decision making process and in the selection of their rulers, casting of votes in elections, making of organized demands on the political system, participating in party politics, participation in political movements, conferences, discussions, strikes and demonstrations, communications with the representatives and other political leaders, involvement in political communication etc. all form part of political participation. Again, participation in a political process has several levels. These are political awareness, disposition to form and hold opinions on public

issues, campaigning, voting and contesting for political office, participation in decision making and so on.

2. Objectives

1. Focuses on kinds of activities which form part of political participation in India.
2. To study the key factors influencing the political participation in India.

3. Methodology

This Paper is based on descriptive study, where the data is collected from secondary sources which include; books, Newspapers, Journals etc.

Political participation refers to the active and willing participation of the masses in the political process particularly in decision-making or policy formation process. Political participation does not mean participation in governmental activities only but also participation in the non-governmental and group activities concerned with public issues. It implies active and effective representation in all the decision-making organizations.

"The Center for Study of Developing Societies" has identified the following kinds of activities which form part of political participation: 1) voting, (2) canvassing for candidates, (3) getting out voters, (4) organization of meetings and rallies,

(5) participation in processions, (6) distribution of pamphlets and campaign literature, (7) other campaign activities, (8) campaign through associations and groups, (9) attending public meetings and rallies, (10) membership of political parties, (11) conducting party leaders in resolving problems and (12) conducting government officials in solving problems.

Political participation also relates to the developmental works and activities through the formulation and implementation of developmental policies and programs, government seeks to increase participation in the decision making process which strengthen the political system in a democratic polity. Country like India, formulates every policy and program of the government eyeing on the more involvement of people in the governmental process. Now, in India, more stress has been laid on the decentralization of power which will really empower the grass root people. Involvement in governmental process through various institutions of local-self government also makes citizens responsible towards their rights and duties and also their responsibilities.

As more participation of people in the political process helps in strengthening the political system, hence, the voting age in India has been reduced from 21 to 18 in 1989 during the period of the then Prime Minister of India, Late Rajiv Gandhi. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had tremendous faith on the potentialities of youth, therefore, to give more and more chances to the youths of India and to materialize his dream of making India one of the strongest nations in the world.

Political systems differ from one society to another; hence, the involvement of people in the political process of the political system may also differ from one society to another. It is not equal in all the political systems. Participation of people in modern democracies is large as compared to the political systems of the ancient times. The involvement of people in the decision making process of the government, i.e. political participation, is duly affected by several important factors. Some of such common factors are psychological factors, socio-economic factors, political factors and situational factors which always influence the people mostly to take part in the decision or policy formation process of the government. In every political system the nature and level of political participation is dependent upon several such factors. Some of the important factors are discussed as following:

4. Psychological factors

Political participation is very much dependent upon the psychological factors. Urge for power is the most important psychological factor of political participation. It is true that every man seeks power because through power he can dominate others and winning over others. Love for power and other values always impel people to get involved in the political process to a large extent. Again, in a society where political activities are valuable, more people will take to recourse to political participation. This is a common phenomenon in the day-to-day politics in India. On the other hand, if political activities are abhorred in a society then naturally less people will participate in politics.

Loneliness is another psychological factor, due to which people participate in politics since they want to meet each other. It is a psychological need which compels political leaders to remain politically active till death; otherwise, they will find life a lonely burden, as they formerly used to be surrounded by people all the time.

5. Social factors

Besides psychological factors, social factors are also affecting political participation. Social factors like education, social stratification, sex, race, religion, ethnicity and rural-urban gap are always affecting political participation.

Education tends to be the most important social factor which influences political participation in a greater and better way. Education widens man's field of interests. It also makes man perfect and makes man conscious towards their rights, duties and responsibilities as a good citizen. Therefore, the nature and level of participation in societies which have a high literary rate is always different from a society inhabited by a majority of illiterates. It has been seen that in the democracies of the West, most of the political leaders are highly educated, but in some other countries the trend is almost the opposite. In the United States of America, education appears to be the most important factor in voting. Americans with high level of formal education are much more likely to vote than those having low levels of formal education, apparently because education seem to contribute to the belief that citizen should participate on a political level.

Studies have shown that due to the distinction of income, even equally educated persons show different rate of political participation. On the other hand some studies show that in the same income group, the political participation differs according to their educational level. Education is, undoubtedly the most important factor of political participation, because through education people can make themselves conscious, aware and informed about the day to day happenings, especially, the political happenings which indirectly induce them to take part in politics.

The studies pointed a clear socio-demographic and psychological picture of voters (and occasionally of participants in campaigns). In contrast to non-participants, participants in general have more money and education, were more interested in politics, more partisan, more efficacious, more likely to be men, more involved in organization, and more rooted in their community. Being an important social factor of political participation, education has been adopted as the fundamental right of the citizen in the developed as well as the developing countries of the world.

Besides education, other social factors such as caste, religion, sex and language also play an important role in influencing political participation. In developing countries like India all these factors appear to be affecting always in molding political behavior and increasing political participation. Caste based politics, caste based elections, and caste considerations in the formation of the government are the realities of Indian politics. In the American political system, the level of political

participation among the Negroes is low. The Whites in the U.S.A form the basic core of political stratum.

Ethnicity and urban-rural gap is always a factor of political participation. Leadership very often remains in the hands of the urban elites. In so many countries in the West, leadership belongs to the higher income group but in poor countries political leaders may belong to the middle or lower classes. People of higher income group are more interested in politics than the lower income group because higher income provides leisure, lessens burden and relaxes anxieties. Therefore higher income Americans are more likely to vote than low income Americans.

6. Social status

Social status, the other social factor, also influences political participation. It is seen that people belonging to lower social status show lower rate of political participation as compared to the people of higher social status. In British politics, the role of social status as a determinant of political participation is clearly reflected in the British party system, House of Lords, Privy Council and Monarchy.

Again, data gathered from U.S.A., Great Britain, Italy, France, Germany, Mexico, Sweden, Norway, Japan and India show that males have higher rate of political participation than the females. Females are more conservatives, detached, and less interested in politics. This is due to the fact that they are more involved with their families. This is also due to the reason that the females have ethics, more stability and higher cultural value which make them misfit in politics. Women in India avoid politics due to association of criminals and money required in politics. Studies have shown that among females also, political participation is less among unmarried girls as compared to married women. Several studies have shown that married males and females show higher rate of political participation in comparison to unmarried males and females.

7. Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic development, which is affecting political participation to a great extent always also ensures involvement of large numbers of people in the decision making process. The main motto of every democratic country is to establish political equality and social justice for achieving the goal of the system. The government of every political system of modern world whether developed or developing, lays stress on achieving more and more socio-economic development of its people because, only through socio-economic progress stability of the system, unity and harmony among the people can bring the political system in the much needed society today. Studies indicate that people are more involved in politics in industrialized and urbanized societies than in the rural and agricultural society having primitive economic system.

Developing countries like India with more population and plurality of needs designed to implement various programs with the object in view to bring quicker socio-economic development. These have been given more importance eyeing on the more involvement of people in the progress of government. Realizing this fact, the framers of the Indian

Constitution included certain chapters in the constitution such as Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policies etc which are working or helping in bringing about socio-economic progress of the state.

However, there are some exceptional instances where the level of political participation does not depend on socio-economic development of the people. Best examples are China and North Vietnam in this regard where we notice high involvement of people in the decision making process in spite of belonging to the socially and economically backward classes of the society. Studies have shown that some under-developed countries represent a high rate of voting participation than economically most developed countries like U.S.A.

8. Political factors

Besides, socio-economic factors, political factors are always the major determinants of political participation too. Nature of political system, the constitution of the state, organization of the government, nature and organization of political parties, nature of press and mass media etc. are all the determinants of political participation. People of a political system are regarded as the basic force of a democratic country; hence, they are encouraged to participate in the process of the government freely and actively. The constitution provides various rights to them, especially, the political rights, e.g., right to vote, right to contest elections, right to hold public offices, freedom to criticize the policies and programs of the government without any fear etc which will ensure involvement of people in large numbers in the process of the government. Developing countries like India try to ensure more and more involvement of people in the political process without any discrimination among the people on the ground of place of birth, sex, race, religion and caste etc. Justice- social, economic and political has been established in the Preamble to the Constitution of India as one of the basic objective and ideal of the constitution.

9. Political Parties

Political parties also play an important role in participation. Political parties communicate opinions and views of the people to the government. They also highlight the problems of the people and suggest remedies. Political parties impart political education to the people through various activities such as organizing public meetings and rallies, through election campaigning, with the formation of the government and also publishing its election manifestos. On the other hand, political parties teach how to choose a perfect candidate, propagate in the election constituencies, explain the process of voting, helps in taking political decision, extends cooperation to making election a success and finally making political system stable and strong through peoples' large participation. Again political parties wage political movements which sometimes involve even the most detached persons. Political parties also work as agents of transforming political culture from one generation to the next. It means that political parties introduce the new generation with the values, beliefs, attitudes, norms and goals of the political system, which in turn, helps in making the political system stable and strong and also increases the

interest of the people to participate in the activities of the political system.

The level of competitions among political parties also affect the turn out in nations where parties are competitive, participation tends to be high, where a single party, constantly wins election, turn out is low. In parliamentary democracies, the presence of a large number of political parties tends to discourage turn out because voters realize that the actual struggle for power occurs as party bargain in the legislature after the election. In a unicameral system the election results are more likely to lead the decisive outcome. It is true that political participation is not uniform in all the societies of the world and a section of society usually abstains from participating in political life, in the ancient Greek city states, for example, the right to participate in any form of political activity was limited to the adult male citizens, women foreigners and slaves were excluded from participation. Some of the Swiss cantons elect their officials and pass laws in annual open-air meeting. But no better evidence of complete citizen participation in government politics can be found. It can be said that in most of the political systems of the world people take part in politics with great interest and remain active in public affairs. But they do not constitute the large portion of the society. This is also true in case of the countries with good and popular government and in those countries were maximum opportunities are given for political participation.

The usual method of political participation is to exercise the right to vote in the elections. Yet a large number of people are averse to political participation. Political scientists have determined four reasons for such aloofness:

First, there may be apathy, which would mean the individual's indifference towards or abstention from electoral affairs. Such a mentality stems from a lack of interest in political affairs.

Second, there may be a certain "cynicism" rooted in suspicion towards and distrust of the motive and activities of others. This attitude develops because of the feeling that politics is a dirty game and that the politicians are, usually, unscrupulous persons.

Third, there may even be a degree of "alienation" or hostility towards politics. In such cases, the person keeps a distance from the active political system. Then, there is also a sense of "anomie" — a feeling of personal ineffectiveness and divorce from the society.

It is because of these reasons that some people keep themselves away from the centre of affairs. It is significant that in the parliamentary election of 1984, the voter participation was the highest (64 per cent), but subsequently, the figures remained between 55.3 per cent and 62 per cent. A recent report reveals that the voter-participation in some provinces has reached 70 per cent, but the overall figure is not at all sufficient when compared with the 80 to 90 per cent polling in Western countries.

10. Suggestions:

1. People must be able to participate. We need to remove barriers to participation and implement policies and procedures that make it easier for people to vote.
2. People must want to participate. It's not enough for voting to be easy; people have to want to take part.
3. For people to want to participate in the political process their participation actually has to matter. It must have a tangible impact on policy decisions, and improve people's lives.
4. Making participation more possible, probable, and powerful means thinking about how individual acts of participation can have the most impact in the world. Most institutions, especially government, don't respond to individual demands (unless you have a lot of money) as well as they do to collective action. So a single act of protest is relatively unlikely to result in transformational changes in the status quo.
5. Need to be actively involved in defining the political, economic and social agenda. A large scale grass roots movement must be initiated to change the perceptions and attitude of both decision makers and voters.
6. One of the ways of promoting political participation is to educate the people on political issues. There are constitutionally mandated institutions of state that are charged with the responsibility of educating the citizens.
7. Public opinion is the sum of all views held by the people on a particular issue at a particular time. Any government that is tolerant of diverse opinions on issues is able to encourage the electorates to participate in the political process.
8. When the government of the day is responsible and accountable to the people, it can encourage the people to participate in the political process of their country. The government of the day must try to be transparent about its dealings with the people. Once this is done, it would naturally encourage the people to participate in the political process.

11. Conclusion

Obviously, there are some cogent reasons for this poor turnout. Politics in India has, in recent years, often become a dirty game and this is one of the reasons why many take no interest. Moreover, people often feel that sometimes crime and politics go hand-in-hand and the mafia-dons have polluted the atmosphere by their unholy alliance with the ruling party leaders. But if a large number of people stay away from the polling booths due to so many factors, democracy surely becomes a misnomer. Modern democracy has become an indirect system due to the enlargement of territory and population. So, people's rule through elections has come to the fore. Naturally, it requires the active and full-fledged involvement of the people in electoral affairs. Hundreds of

thousands of people remain away from polling booths and some others turn up only to complain that they do not support any candidate fielded in the particular constituency. Hence they press the NOTA (None of the above) button. Indian democracy

is now suffering from a unending ailment and it urgently needs to recover. Instead of blaming the absentees, it is imperative to purify our democracy so that it can serve the real interests of the people.

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