

Uncovering the Patterns of Socioeconomic Variables and Voting Turnout

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Abstract

One approach at examining the factors that affect voting turnout is the role of socio-economic status (SES). The presence of formal education, age of citizens, gender, income, etc can all impact the degree to which political participation is exhibited. It holds that those with high socio-economic status are more likely to participate in politics. Political behavior like any other aspect of human behavior takes place in a particular socio-economic and cultural milieu. But the association between political participation and some of this socio-economic status differ relatively in terms of culture, space, time, individuals and of political context. Usually, that a voter's turnout is influenced by the level of SES has been built around the assumption that, socio-economic variables effect political participation of citizens. However, the present study found out that only certain socio-economic factors have effect on voting turnout of the voters in spite of the overall high voting participation.

Keywords: Political Participation, Voting, Socio-economic status, Democracy

Introduction

Voting is the foundational concept and virtue for our entire democratic structure (Joshua A. Douglas, 2013). The universality of the franchise is important for both nationhood and democracy. It is the bedrock of a democratic system. The practice of franchise has been significant for acquisition of the rights towards an effective citizenship by all regardless of race, gender, caste, colour or creed. The achievement of franchise is an indication of accomplishment as an all-embracing nationhood (Neavera Bekeer & Cindy-Lee, 2014).

The importance of voting in a democracy need hardly be overemphasized. In a modern representative democracy, voting is the most fundamental political act. It is the most important and basic activity by which the citizens get assimilated with the political process. Voting is considered to be an essential ingredient of political participation. In democratic system, voters become the main actor for the success or failure of a democracy. Electoral turnout is a test for healthy upkeep of any democratic political institution. Further voter turnout is one of the crucial indicators of how citizens participate in the governance of their country. Higher voter turnout is in most cases a sign of the vitality of democracy, while lower turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process. Hence the importance of voting cannot be ignored in a democracy.

Political participation is an important indicator to assess the degree of political development. It is the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy and rulers are made accountable to the ruled. It is generally considered that higher the participation, the healthier is the growth of a democratic system. Generally, voting participation tends to be higher among better educated, members of higher occupational and income groups, middle aged, dominant ethnic and religious groups,

people with political family background, settled residents, urban dwellers and members of voluntary associations (Herbert McClosky, 1968). This is because higher status individuals are more likely to experience social settings that are informationally richer on many subjects (e.g., politics), than those of lower status, making them more likely to acquire participation-enabling knowledge and civic skill (James Gimpel et al., 2003). However, the correlation between political participation and some of these socioeconomic variables may vary from culture to culture in different political contexts and their effect on political participation may not be stable.

Research Method

This work is based on qualitative, intensive in nature and data is collected from the field study conducted during the year 2016 which is specifically based on the last Nagaland Legislative Assembly Elections. For the present study, it is limited to the district of Mokokchung. Politically, Mokokchung is one of the most crucial districts in the state since it represents the largest ten representatives out of sixty MLAs to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly. For the study, a sample size of five Assembly Constituencies was selected to conduct the study. The selection is made using the Systematic Random Sampling (SRS) method. From each of the sampled assembly constituencies, three polling stations were selected. Out of which thirty voters (respondents) each were selected from the electoral roll of the selected polling station. This was supplemented by interview with people from various walks of life to enrich the data collected from the field. The secondary information is gathered from various published and unpublished academic books, journals, articles, official records, statistical documents and seminar papers, etc. The study has a total sample of four hundred and seven (407) respondents.

Results and Analysis

Keeping in mind the fact that since socio-economic environment constitute crucial settings for political participation, the respondent's level of voting participation is examined against the background of the socio-economic variables. The selected SES are limited to the following items (i) Age (ii) Educational Qualification (iii) Occupational Status (iv) Marital Status (v) Gender and (vi) Place of Residence (urban – rural).

The participation of the respondents in voting is based on a question, “Did you cast your vote in the last Nagaland State Legislative Assembly Election?” with two options - yes or no. Those respondents who have voted are considered as voters who voted whereas those respondents who did not vote are treated as non-voters.

Voting Turnout and Age

Age being an important component of socio-economic status becomes an important determinant of voting participation. Various studies have shown that participation in terms of voting grows steadily till it reaches a peak in the middle years and recedes as people grow older (John M. Strate et al., 1989).

Table 1: Voting Turnout and Age

Age	Voted (In Percentage)
18 – 29 years	80
30 – 44 years	87.64
45 – 59 years	93.02
60 years and above	83.92
Total	86.48

Source: Field Study, 2016

Table 1 indicates that the highest voting turnout has come from those in the age group of 45-59 years (93.02%). It means that voters in the age of 44-59 are the most active voters in the district. They are followed by those in the age group of 30-44 years with a voting turnout of 87.64 per cent. The 60 years and above have voted at a higher rate (83.92%) as compared to those in 18-29 years age group (80%).

Despite the fact that a high percentage of the sample voters (86.48%) have exercised their franchise the study shows differences in the voting pattern among the four age groups. The present study shows that voting increases from youth to a peak in the middle age, which is followed by slight decline in the old age. Interestingly, the 60 years and above were quite active participant in voting as compared to the younger voters in age group of 18-29 years. The most active participants in terms of voting are those in the age group of 45-59 years. And though voting turnout of younger voters is not low yet they voted at a lower rate as compared to older voters. It means that amongst the five age groups the youngest voters have voted at the lowest.

There are several reasons why there exist differences in the voting pattern among the different age groups with younger voters exhibiting less enthusiasm to vote as compared to the older voters. Paul R. Abramson (1982) has observed that the young are less likely to vote than their elders, partly because they are more often geographically mobile, have weaker community ties, and have not yet established the social ties that contribute to voting. Likewise, the young people are more likely to lack political knowledge and are less exposed to the electoral and political process (Norman Nie et al., 1974). Another reason for young people's lower levels of political participation (compared to older respondents) could be the lifecycle effect. One of the effects of lifecycle is that as young people become older they get more experience in the electoral and political process (P. Martikainen et al., 2005). Understandably their spirit and enthusiasm expands with experiences in the electoral processes as they grow older. Similarly, the life-cycle explanation of political participation also see younger citizen as politically inactive as other commitments, such as school, work or social lives, crowd out political interest (Scott W. Despsato & Barbara Norrander, 2005).

Further, it is generally considered that young people have comparatively lower levels of political knowledge than their older contemporaries (Ellen Quintelier, 2007). As they grow older they acquire knowledge, experiences and social connections. Many of these resources are considered to motivate people to take part in politics. On the other hand, people appear to become increasingly likely to vote as they progress from early adulthood through middle adulthood (M. J. Turner et al., 2001). Low rates of political participation among the young may be due to lack of experience in political activities, i.e. they are focused more on non-political concerns such as obtaining education and occupation and therefore do not develop the knowledge of the political process to the same degree than the older, more established citizens possess (John M. Strate et al., 1989). Similarly, Converse and Niemi (1971) has also theorized that younger people are less likely to vote than older people, as they are less integrated into society.

However, in maturity certain development occur which tend to increase the motivation and the pressure to take part in the political life of the community (Robert Putman, 1966). As people grow older they acquire many resources such as political experience, knowledge and skills for political participation.

Voting Turnout and Education

Among all the socio-economic variables, education has been established as the most important component that influences citizens propensity to vote. Education is particularly important as it provides voters with the skills, knowledge and civic duty necessary to effectively take part in politics (C.A. Sheerin, 2007). Citizens with more

formal education are more likely to vote; each additional year of education is associated with higher turnout (Joshua Harder & Jon A. Krosnick, 2008). Education may impart skills that enhance a person's ability to understand how the civic process operates and how to navigate the requirements of registration. Education could motivate people to vote by instilling civic duty, excite them in the political process, or placing them in social settings in which voting is normative (J. Nagler, 1991).

The impact of education on a person's turnout depends partly on the educational attainment and political activity of other people in that individual's environment (Robert Putnam & J. F. Helliwell, 1999). Similarly, the more a person's education attainment exceeds that of others in his or her age group, the more likely he or she is to vote. Comparative educational attainment rates such as these are much better predictors of a person's turnout than is the person's absolute educational attainment (S. Tenn, 2005).

Almond and Verba (1965) in their "five nations" studies concludes that political activities increase with the rise of education levels of citizens. Basing on the strong correlations that exist between education and political participation, many western scholars have generalized the findings as one of the common yardstick. However, studies in India do not support these findings. Eldersveld & Ahmad (1978), on the basis of cross-national survey, conclude that the highly educated are not necessarily most politically active. Goel (1974) also observed that in India the educated individual is no more to vote than the lesser educated person.

However, the generalization about educational status and voting turnout has not been sustained in the present study. Participation levels have not kept pace with education gains among the respondents. The voting percentage does not necessarily increase with rise in educational qualification. Voting percentage is quite high for all educational categories. But the highest percentage has come from the lower educational groups. If education truly imparts the civic skills that drive political participation, then increased levels of education should have led to higher levels of participation among the more educated respondents.

Table 2: Voting Turnout and Education

Education level	Voted (In Percentage)
Non- literate	88
Under matriculate	89.47
Higher Secondary	86.40
Graduate	83.33
Graduate and above	85.36
Total	86.48

Source: Field Study, 2016

The study indicates that respondents in the five educational categories participated at a high rate with a voting turnout percentage ranging from 83.33 per cent to 89.47 per cent. Such a high voter turnout signifies a healthy democratic trend of political participation. The data presented in Table 2 shows that the under matriculate recorded the highest (89.47%) voting turnout. They are followed by non-literate voters with 88 per cent voting turnout. The data also reveals that voters from higher secondary category recorded 86.40 per cent voting turnout. They are followed by graduate and above voters with 85.36 per cent voting turnout. And the lowest number of voting turnout is recorded by voters in the graduate category (83.33%).

The present study suggests that unlike the studies conducted in the west, voters falling in the lower educational category are not isolated from the political life. But they are quite active participants in voting. Voting participation has been highest among the

lower educational group as compared to voters who fall in the highest educational category. Therefore no concrete generalization can be made regarding the relationship between political participation and the educational variable in the present study. Perhaps the voters belonging to the higher category of education are more aware of the political culture that is prevalent in the state of Nagaland which is often characterized as corrupt and violent and dirty.

Voting Turnout and Marital Status

Marital status also has a far reaching impact on the level of political participation. Married people are more apt to have made political commitments in the prevailing order that extends beyond the self. Married life- the socially conventional life for adults may reflect or even create a preference for order and stability in one's domestic life, and this preference may be transferred to the political realm (Kingston & Finkel, 1987).

Married person usually differs in their approach and perceptions to politics than the others. Several studies suggest that married people are relatively more likely to participate in the political system (Susan Welch, 1977). Their higher voting rates may reflect interpersonal influences within family that may motivate them to participate in voting. Married people would seem to have a greater psychological stake in the established order and thus may be more likely to participate politically, both to affirm their commitment to, and bolster that moral order (Kingston & Finkel, 1987).

On the other hand, Plissner (1983) argues that conversely with fewer commitments rooted in their domestic lives, singles may be less responsive to political appeals. Marital status of a person therefore is an important factor which influences the course of political participation.

Table 3: Voting Turnout and Marital Status

Marital Status	Voted (In Percentage)
Married	89.56
Unmarried	82.92
Others	76.92
Total	86.48

Source: Field Study, 2016

An analysis of Table 3 depicts significant similarity with previous generalizations that married voters do participate in the political life at higher rate than others. As per the data given in Table 3, an overwhelming majority (89.56%) of married voters exercised their franchise. They are followed by unmarried voters whose voting turnout is 82.92 per cent. The lowest percentage of voters has come from respondents under the category of 'others' with 76.92 per cent. The study indicates that married respondents are obviously more active in terms of voting participation than voters in the other two categories.

The following reasons can be attributed why married voters turnout in high numbers than the unmarried and others. Being married may affect turnout habits due to peer effects, if one partner exhibit a stable pattern of voting behavior this may induce the other partner to do so (K. Denny & O. Doyle, 2009). Other studies have similarly observed that married couples are relatively more likely to participate in the political systems in comparison with other marital status (W. Hobbes et al., 2014). A motivated spouse is likely to encourage an unmotivated partner to vote which increases in voting turnout (W. Glaser, 1959). It is also contended that people who live together vote together and also change their minds together between elections (R. Hohnston et al., 2003).

One of the respondents commented that "it is quite natural and much more convenient for both husband and wife to go to poll together to vote during the elections". Another respondent expressed a similar view: "It has become a tradition in our area to

always follow our spouse to vote during election”. For married couples, voter turnout efforts targeting one spouse are highly effective in convincing the other to vote (D.W Nickerson, 2008). Thus the entry into marriage creates new opportunities for husbands and wives to learn from and influence each other and thus either to encourage or discourage political involvement on the part of the other (M. Kent Jennings & Laura Stoker, 1995).

Voting Turnout and Gender

It is common in all societies that men are usually more active than women in politics. Analysis of the most extensive survey of political participation in America shows that women in the mid 1990’s continued to prove less engaged than men in many other common forms of activism, such as campaign contribution, affiliation with political organizations, contacting public officials and organizing to solve community problems (Nancy Burns, 2007). The differences in voting behaviors of men and women do not happen because they were born male or female, but instead the differences occur because of the different socialization processes of males and females (Nancy Burns et al., 2001). Women participate less than men in politics though there are no legal barriers. They are less exposed to political society and their nature of work keeps them away from political activities and does not enhance political efficacy.

Since political participation is a central component of democracy as well as a means for achieving greater equality, gender inequalities in political participation may both reflect and further reify gender stratification throughout society (Sydney Verba et al., 1997). Understanding this gender inequalities in political participation remain an important part of democracy’s unresolved dilemma of unequal participation. Nevertheless, the factor of gender continues to be a universal yardstick in many empirical studies unraveling the patterns of political participation.

Table 4: Voting Turnout and Gender

Gender	Voted (In Percentage)
Male	92.38
Female	80.20
Total	86.48

Source: Field Study, 2016

The present study reveals that both male and female respondents turnout in high number for voting. However the male respondents voted slightly more than the female voters. An overwhelming majority of male voters (92.38%) voted. In comparison 80.20 per cent of female voters exercised their franchise (Table 4).

Voting Turnout and Occupational Status

Occupational status has a far reaching impact on political participation of the electorates. Being employed is sometimes taken as a resource that facilitates participation and is also believed to encourage the development of political attitudes among voters. Several studies in the West show that professional persons are the most likely to get involved in politics (K. Andresen, 1975). R.F. Lane (1937) has suggested that certain characteristics of jobs facilitate political participation such as, (a) the development and use of social and intellectual skills that might carry over politics; (b) opportunity to interact with like-minded others; (c) higher than averages stakes in governmental policy; (d) roles on the job that carry over to public services.

Table 5: Voting Turnout and Occupation

Occupational Status	Voted (In Percentage)
Service	85.38
Self-employed	90
Cultivator	90
Unemployed	83.46
Total	86.48

Source: Field Study, 2016

However the data as highlighted in Table 5 does not support findings of earlier studies. The study data indicate that the respondents in the self-employed and cultivator category were the most active participants in the poll. Both category of voters have similarly recorded 90 per cent of voting turnout. The above two categories of respondents is followed by those in service who recorded a turnout percentage of 85.38 per cent. Though not low, the lowest percentage of turnout among the four occupational categories came from those who are unemployed (83.46%). Therefore, the data in the present study do not establish any significant association between occupational status of the electorates and voting participation.

Voting Turnout and Place of Residence

Place of residence of an individual is considered to be another crucial component among the socio-economic variables that influences political participation. Various studies have documented difference in the political activities of urban and rural people indicating that urban-rural dichotomy is also a variable to be taken into consideration (Lester W. Milbrath & M.L. Goel, 1977). Generally it is found out that urban political participation was higher than rural political participation perhaps because of the differences in social status, education and occupation (Norman H. Nie et. al., 1969). It is generally assumed that urban residents generally have higher involvement due to their closeness to the center of society, opportunity for interaction and communication.

For rural electorates, elections are considered to be local and not national affair, dealing with the exchange of votes for benefits of a non-policy type. In contrast, for urban voters, voting decision is made independently of social, cultural, and especially financial obligations. These political attitudinal differences can mostly be explained by differences in the socioeconomic backgrounds among the groups, in particular between the poor and less-educated rural and the higher socioeconomic status urban (Stithorn Thananithichot, 2011). However, there is no consensus on how and to what extent community size effects individual political action. Yet it is considered that place of residence of a citizen occupies a dominant position among the social factors that influence political participation.

In many studies conducted in the west it has been found out that rural inhabitant are less likely to become active in politics than the urban dwellers. However in India these generalizations do not apply in the context of political participation. In fact in India many elections have witnessed rural residents who are predominantly poor class of people turnout for voting in very large numbers (Yogendra Yadav, 2004).

Table 6: Voting Turnout and Place of Residence

Place of Residence	Voted (In Percentage)
Urban	88.69
Rural	95.89
Total	86.48

Source: Field Study, 2016

The study result is found to be inconsistent with previous generalisation as found in the west which holds that political participation is higher among urban residents as compared to rural dwellers. The data in Table 6 indicates that rural voters are more active as compared to urban voters in terms of voting turnout. The rural voters recorded a vote turnout of 95.89 per cent whereas the urban voters recorded a turnout of 88.69 per cent. The difference in terms of rural-urban voting turnout is 7.2 per cent. The result indicates that rural population does remain more active when it comes to voting participation.

There may be many explanations why rural voter's turnout was comparatively higher as compared to the urban electorates. Majority of the population of Mokokchung district live in the rural areas (71.37%; Census, 2011). And hence majority of the voters have come from the rural areas. This factor may have led to large scale mobilization by party/candidates in the rural areas. This could be one of the reason why voting turnout has been high among the rural respondents as compared to the urban dwellers in the district of Mokokchung.

Although democratic elections have increased participation among the rural voters of the district, questions arise regarding the depth of this participation. External pressure such as "vote buying" – the practice of payments in exchange for votes may mean that monetary obligations can become the major facilitators behind political participation, thus undermining independent political participation.

Conclusion

The paper examined the level of voting participation against the background of the SES. The study found out that voting turnout of the respondents is quite high. The study indicates that the most active participants in voting are the respondents in the 45-59 years age group, the under matriculate, the married, male, those self-employed, cultivator and the rural respondents. The less active voting participants are those in the 18-29 years age group, the graduate, 'others' category under marital status, female, the unemployed and the voters residing in urban areas. Concurrently, in contrast with the previous studies on the association between voting and the different aspects of socio-economic variables, the key finding of the present study reveals that respondent's SES have only partial association with voting turnout except for marital status and gender. There is a positive relationship between voting and the above two SES factors. Irrespective of their socio-economic background, such high level of political participation is a must for democracy wherein the voices and interests of the people are generated towards a healthy community. Through such kind of exercising one's rights creates the feeling of a responsible citizen whereby a better understanding between the state and society is established.

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