

# **From the Heart to the Ballot: Unmasking the Psychology of the Indian Voter**

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## Abstract

Voting behavior in such a diverse country like India is a product of the interplay of various factors ranging from caste to basic psychological concepts about human behavior. This study investigates the determinants of Indian voting behavior through a mixed-methods approach combining primary and secondary research. Primary data were collected through a survey of 200 participants aged 15–80 across varied genders, professions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and urban–rural settings, alongside an in-depth interview with the Mayor of Ambala. Secondary research involved an extensive review of academic literature, election studies, and psychological frameworks. The findings reveal that while voters largely reject overt influences such as caste and freebies at a conscious level, these factors continue to exert subtle subconscious influence. Additionally, voting decisions were found to be shaped by an almost equal tension between emotion and logic, highlighting the Indian voter as neither purely rational nor purely emotional, but distinctly human. This research underscores the evolving yet enduring psychological foundations of Indian democracy.

## Introduction

Every five years, the world watches in awe as the great Indian election unfolds. It is a democratic spectacle like no other, unmatched in its scale and intensity. More than 900 million eligible voters (Business Standard, 2024), including the rich, the poor, the urban elite, the rural farmer, the first-time voter, the seasoned elder, are momentarily handed an extraordinary power to decide the future of their nation, India. We all know that voters are divided by their choices; however, they are united. Not just by an inked finger, but by something psychologically much deeper. And beneath their decisions and moral choices lies a complicated reality waiting to be understood: why do Indians vote the way they do?

It's a question that rages under headlines, often overlooked as inessential. News channels and pollsters predict who the citizens will vote for, focusing on numbers, margins, and electoral outcomes. This fixation on results sidelines a deeper enquiry. The psychological why, which is the key concept to understanding Indian democracy to its very core, remains underexplored.

In India, voting is hardly a logically calculated decision. Rather, it is a whirlwind of emotions over logic. Or is it not? The members of the voting population are not robots who vote according to the data fed into them. They are humans, and whether they'd accept it or not, their choices, consciously or unconsciously, are swayed by promises of freebies, the allure of caste or loyalty to their backgrounds, and the presence of fear and overwhelming emotions.

To understand this phenomenon, we have to look at it through the lens of behavioral economics and cognitive psychology. If we look at Daniel Kahneman's theory of System 1 and System 2 thinking, it explains how voters often rely on quick, emotional instincts rather than a slow and logical analysis (Kahneman, 2011). Everyone loves to believe that they vote with reason. That they weigh the pros and cons and compare the policies, but more often than not, they vote with their gut and not their mind. They vote with memory. With caste. With fear. With the mentality that someone "like them" will understand them better (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social biases like herd mentality or confirmation bias prove to be more influential than actual policies to consider. Well, this is not a weakness; it is human nature, and this is the nature that gives rise to the objectives of this paper:

- To examine the psychological factors influencing voting behaviour in Indian democracy.
- To analyze the role of cognitive processes, including intuitive and deliberative thinking, in electoral decision making.
- To investigate how social identity markers such as caste, memory, fear, and perceived similarity shape voter preferences.
- To contextualize voter decision making as an outcome of human psychological patterns rather than purely rational policy evaluation.

This paper begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of voter psychology through concepts drawn from behavioral economics and cognitive psychology. It then details the research methodology, combining primary data from a citizen survey and an interview with a sitting mayor with extensive secondary research. The subsequent sections present and analyze survey findings to examine how emotions, logic, caste, religion, and welfare incentives influence voting behaviour. This analysis is supported by state-level illustrations and established academic literature. The paper concludes by synthesizing psychological insights from both primary and secondary findings to present a human-centred understanding of Indian voting behaviour and democratic participation. The paper also draws examples from different states of India that stand as evidence to understand a voter's psychology, such as Uttar Pradesh, where caste-based alliances dominate; Tamil Nadu, which gives center stage to freebie politics etc (Jaffrelot, 2014).

At its heart, this research does not point fingers. It does not criticize the Indian voter; it aims to understand them. We need to strengthen the knot of democracy, and for that we must think of voters, not as citizens, but as humans first. Humans who have hopes, fears, and untold stories that shape every click on the EVMs.

## Results and Discussion

### Literature Review

India, as the world's largest democracy, is bound to display a complex electoral landscape. This landscape is affected by a number of sociocultural and psychological reasons. The survey conducted helped gain a primary insight into how voters might think, but to make sense of the data it is also essential to scrutinize existing research and studies that have investigated this subject.

By following key research findings across the various constituent elements of the issue, and critically analyzing them, we will highlight the established and underestimated influences of the voting behavior in India.

### Caste

N.D Palmer claims that "Caste considerations are given great weight in the selection of candidates and in the appeals to voters during election campaigns" (Palmer, 1976). The prevalence of caste as a driving factor in electoral politics is widespread. The caste system is an important tool in uniting, yet also dividing the population. Political parties tend to give weightage to caste labels in selecting their candidates, as well as the constituencies they target for support. When choosing their candidates, even professedly secularist parties like the Congress, the Janata Dal, the CPI, and the CPM take caste into account. For instance, the Samajwadi Party, which has a strong Yadav support base, allocated the Yadav leader, Akhilesh Yadav to the constituency of Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, which has a significant Yadav population (Jaffrelot, 2014).

Decades ago, the Mandal Commission, led by B.P. Mandal, aimed to address social and educational backwardness of certain classes in India. The commission released a report from 1980, suggesting reservations for OBCs in government employment and educational institutions, with which they legitimized caste-based political mobilization. When V.P. Singh's government put it into effect in 1990, it led to the political forces of backward castes becoming more unified (Yadav, 1996).

The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, and Samajwadi Party challenged the political domination of upper caste elites by establishing clear caste based agendas. The Bahujan Samaj Party established Kanshi Ram with the goal of bringing the Dalits and other oppressed groups together under a single political banner. The effectiveness of caste-based mobilization in India is demonstrated by the party's electoral success (Bahujan Samaj Party, n.d.).

According to the National Election Study conducted following the 2014 elections, caste considerations influenced voting decisions for approximately 33% of voters, a trend that is especially noticeable in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This is because the Samajwadi Party (Uttar Pradesh) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (Bihar) concentrated on mobilizing OBCs, changing the political landscape in these states.

In actuality, one of the primary features of Uttar Pradesh's political processes is caste based mobilization. According to the 2011 census, Uttar Pradesh has 14.2% Upper Castes, 44% OBCs, and 20.8% SCs (Government of India, 2011; Pai, 2013). The upper caste groups fall in the minority, and due to the significant differences in the region, it has often been regarded as one of the most economically disadvantaged states. Thus, caste mobilization has been a useful tool in bettering the state by trying to empower the middle and lower castes in U.P.'s electoral politics.

The above findings prove that caste is being used as an instrument in manipulating Indian politics. However, what this paper also aims to understand is why things like caste prove to be so influential to a voter. The following concepts can be used to explain this.

### **Freebies**

The freebie culture, where political parties offer voters numerous benefits in return for their support, has consistently been on the rise, distorting voter behavior substantially. Freebies frequently give voters an instant material appeal, which diverts their attention from assessing the parties' efficiency of policy making and governance. This results in a vote bank, i.e. a group of voters belonging to a common caste, religion, community, or speaking a common language, who consistently support a particular political party.

As the freebie culture continues and welfare schemes are repeated, voters start viewing the party as a benefactor. This solidifies the voters' dependence on that party, preventing them from taking the party's alignment with their needs and principles into consideration. Voters feel indebted towards the party they receive freebies from and think of their vote to them a favor they are repaying. Furthermore, freebie politics pave the way for populist competition among parties, leading to unsustainable public spending and higher risk of debt accumulation, which voters are not fully aware of. The entire concept of freebies and handouts weakens democratic accountability to a dangerous extent.

Political parties in Tamil Nadu have been consistently attempting to surpass each other by offering greater freebies. The freebie-driven campaigns surged forward in 2006 and 2011, when the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam announced schemes for free distribution of color television sets, fans, laptops, land, employment etc.

Since 2023, as freebies like free electricity, free gas, power subsidies and financial aid for women and unemployed youth have been offered in state elections, the cost for freebies in some states like Maharashtra has risen to 2.2% of its GDP. Thus, freebies also have adverse effects on the state finances. The most indebted state governments, like Tamil Nadu, are predicted to get worse if this practice continues (Reserve Bank of India, 2022; Economic & Political Weekly, 2023).

## Religion

For many voters, faith is not spiritual. Rather, it's political, and political parties take advantage of the fact that the voters' fear and faith are two sides of the same coin. They appeal to religious sentiments through promises of support and security of certain religious groups. By doing this, parties prey on the fear of the voters whose religion may be vulnerable, thereby manipulating voters to fear opposing parties and neglect other factors and rubrics through which a party should be judged. Exploitation of these faiths and fears of the voters on a large-scale leads to the tag of a religious-majoritarian party, which has the potential of securing major support from voters belonging to a particular religion.

A study conducted by The Pew Research Center discovered that religion played a role in voting decisions for 64% of Indian adults. Thus, many voters' votes rely, not on their aspirations, but on the aspirations of their religious group. India is well known for having a high percentage of population which considers religion to be their major social identity, so their political preferences line up with their religious interests. Furthermore, slogans and campaigns are used to spread a party's stand regarding religious matters. Religion is also closely linked to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In such cases, an ingroup-outgroup narrative is formed between religions, a situation which political parties make the most of.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, which brought upon the resurgence of Hindutva, consolidated a large number of Hindu votes, leading to its win in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014. According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of the Indian population is Hindu, which gives BJP a major upper hand in the elections, which is one factor due to which they have been in power for more than 10 years. In their time of power, BJP has taken many steps to display their Hindutva ideology, seeking to integrate Indians around Hindu beliefs and values. Some of the measures taken to achieve this are the revocation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya (PRS Legislative Research, 2019).

Voters tend to support leaders who usually converse in or can speak their language. Thus, parties nominate candidates based on their ability to speak the preferred language, thereby mobilizing support. Leaders who are unable to speak a local language may receive less support due to the voters' inability to relate to them and consequently, they will show less support, while leaders who are well versed with the local language are perceived as easier to trust and are highly appreciated.

## Secondary Research: Psychological Findings

In a diverse country like India where illiteracy levels run high, they hinder the outcomes of the elections as many might not possess the power to make rational and informed decisions. Additionally, low literacy levels also cause tensions to run high as voters are then easily manipulated by false promises or unnecessary rooms.

Social Identity Theory is a psychological framework, created by Henri Tajfel and John Turner examines how individuals derive a sense of self based on belonging to a group. These groups affect people's beliefs,

attitudes, and behaviors. This theory consists of three core components; categorization, identification, and comparison. This heavily applies to the Indian voter, as they often categorize themselves by caste, regarding it as their ingroup and other castes as their outgroup. They then identify with their ingroup and associate it with a sense of belonging, while comparing themselves to their outgroups and perceive themselves as superior, while the outgroup as inferior.

Confirmation Bias refers to the tendency to notice and accept evidence which confirms one's beliefs while ignoring conflicting evidence (Nickerson, 1998). Voters which have a long built preference to one party may oversee the party's shortcomings and failures and share only positive narratives to defend the party. Voters from a particular caste or religious group may only pay heed to parties whose narratives align with their identity. Algorithm-driven news makes the matter worse by showing the voter more of what he or she wants to see and believe, thus fixating on one point of view, thus reducing efficient decision-making on the voters' behalf.

Status Quo Bias refers to the preference to keep things the way they are, thus preventing change, believing that change invites risk (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Due to this, many voters tend to abide by the same party, following their family and community, as they fear the precariousness and uncertainty of following new parties. It explains why some voters, even upon being dissatisfied with a party, keep voting for it because they are used to it and know what to expect. This bias can keep inefficient parties in power and prevent innovation.

Bandwagon Effect refers to the inclination to take on certain beliefs, opinions, and behaviors, where the popularity of something encourages others to follow, disregarding their own preferences (Leibenstein, 1950). Many voters tend to vote for the popular or winning parties, thereby following the crowd behavior, getting influenced by mass rallies and emotional speeches and abandoning their own values, beliefs, and interests. As a result, smaller parties get disregarded, no matter how qualified they are.

Herd mentality is the tendency of people to conform to the majority opinion out of a need to belong, pressure or fear of social criticism (Asch, 1951). Voters are usually influenced by family traditions, caste, and community-based voting. Large rallies may create pressure to join the majority and avoid feeling left out. Some make decisions out of fear of judgement by family and peers, thus, 'following the herd' and not making decisions based on their own thoughts and opinions.

## Research Methodology

To understand why Indians vote the way they do, not just who they vote for, we had to dig deeper than just data tables and unending TV debates. We had to communicate directly with the source and really listen to the voices that are the actual power of democracy.

To add original insight, this project includes survey-based primary research, targeting people from multiple age groups, states, and social backgrounds. A Google Forms questionnaire was designed that includes well-thought-out questions mixing in multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended formats to explore the importance of caste, religion, and freebies in voting decisions; the emotional vs. logical thought process during elections; the influence of family, social media, and community; and voter self-awareness.

The survey was digitally shared among high school and college students (to represent the youth/future voters), business tycoons, working professionals and homemakers, as well as local community members

in both urban and rural areas, to include ground level realities. In total, 200 respondents completed the survey in June 2025. This data has been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively To add further depth to the study, we conducted an online interview with a sitting mayor who opened our minds to her main views on the Indian voter. Through this interview, we could dissect the critical aspects of voter thinking. Her reflections gave us a direct understanding of electoral psychology from a candidate’s perspective.

Alongside primary research, this report is supported by extensive secondary research. We reviewed and analyzed a large number of academic papers, policy documents, election data, media articles, and psychological studies that we deemed essential to our study.

The following report is, therefore, an investigation that gives us an understanding of the voter’s mind itself which is something no election can fully explain on its own.

## Results and Discussion

### Primary Research

#### Citizen Survey: Findings and Analysis

To understand voting behavior in greater depth, a survey was conducted targeting individuals across varied age groups, professions, and geographies. The results reveal stories and instincts which act as an anchor to our government.

#### Demographics

200 participants completed the survey. The participants were of many different ages ranging from 15 to 80 years of which 91% of respondents were of eligible voting age. A majority of the responses received (59%) were from 2 age groups; 25-35 (27.5%) and 35-45 (31.5%) There were 93 females and 103 males. 4 respondents did not disclose their gender.

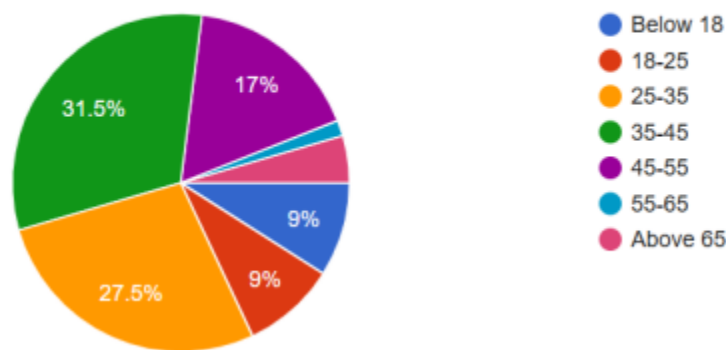


Fig. 1. Age Distribution of Respondents

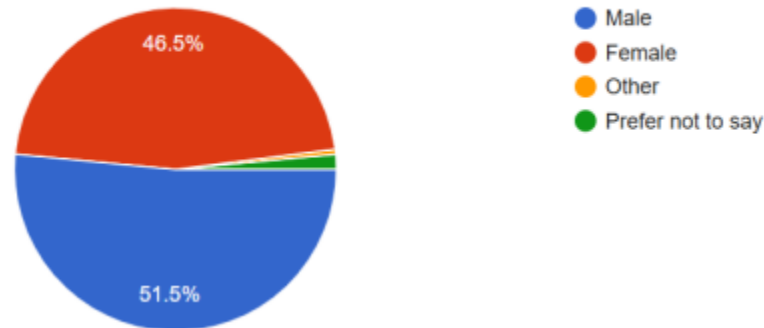


Fig. 2. Gender Distribution of Respondents

A dominant 92% of participants identified themselves as urban residents while the remaining 8% said they were from rural areas. This skew towards the urban side shows that more people in cities are using digital technology. The respondents of the survey came from varied economic backgrounds to diversify the study further.

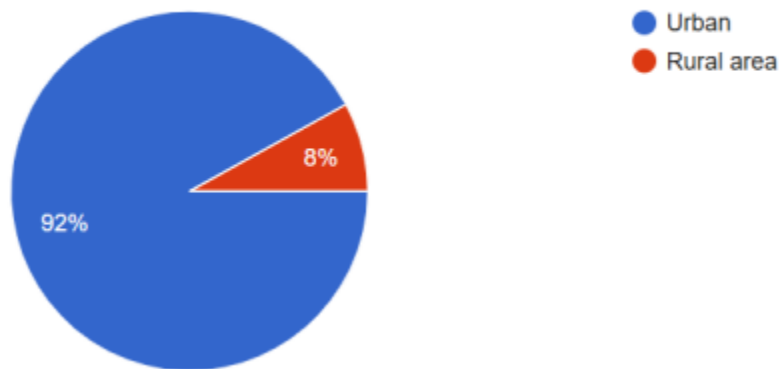


Fig. 3. Residential Distribution of Respondents

### Survey Findings and Analysis

Voting decisions reflect a continuous tension between multiple influencing factors, particularly between logic and loyalty, and between policy-based evaluation and identity-based considerations. This survey examines how these influences operate simultaneously within voters' decision-making processes. The findings reveal patterns that challenge common assumptions about voter rationality and highlight the complex psychological foundations underlying electoral behavior. They do not attempt to criticize or generalize the Indian voter, but rather, understand the emotional triggers that may influence voting preferences, be it subconsciously.

One revealing aspect of the survey was the role of caste in voting decisions. When asked directly about how caste influences their vote, 31.5% of the respondents disagreed, while 23% of the respondents strongly disagreed. This suggests that most of the people, over 54%, do not consciously consider caste and community while voting and are moving away from norms and regularities that existed and continue to exist in India. This, however, is not where the story ends.



Although a majority of respondents said that they do not consider caste while voting, an influential 20% admitted to being influenced by caste, and a significant 25.5% selected the neutral option. There is a certain ambiguity which could suggest indifference, or something deeper that doesn't seem to be a point of concern at the first glance. Selecting the neutral option does not necessarily suggest that the respondent has no opinion. Rather, it could suggest internal conflict or social desirability bias. Beliefs related to caste are programmed into people's brains in Indian society. This, as a subconscious influence, may persist even when voters are continuously rejecting it.

**Do you believe your caste/community influences your voting decision?**

200 responses

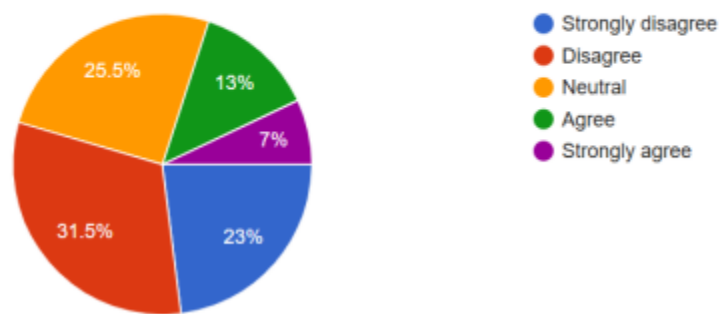


Fig. 4. Influence of Caste/Community on Voting Behavior

In a follow up question, only 8% of the people confessed to “always” voting for someone from their community, while 33.5% claimed that they never did. A prevailing pattern can be seen. The numbers suggest progress. It can be seen that caste is not a deciding factor, but the subtleties indicate that it is still a lingering whisper in the background, even in urban voting booths.

**How often do you vote for a candidate belonging to your caste/community?**

200 responses

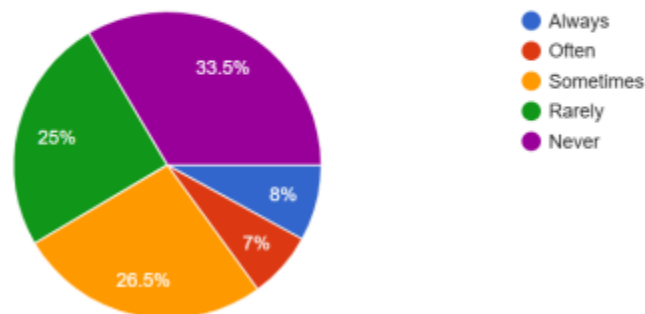


Fig. 5. Percentages of People Voting for Candidates from the Same Caste

Another illuminating result came from the question that asked voters if they had chosen a party solely because it promised benefits like free ration, jobs, cash, or similar schemes. An overwhelming 84.5% said no, with only 15.5% admitting to doing so. These results directly challenge the belief that Indians are easily swayed by freebies. Further, supporting this, only 23% of the respondents considered ‘immediate benefits’ and ‘freebies and welfare schemes’ among the top three factors influencing their vote. This clearly

suggests that while material benefits do play a role in steering some votes, they are far from the dominant motivator for a large majority of the citizens surveyed.

Have you ever voted for a party because it promised benefits (e.g., free ration, cash, jobs)?  
200 responses

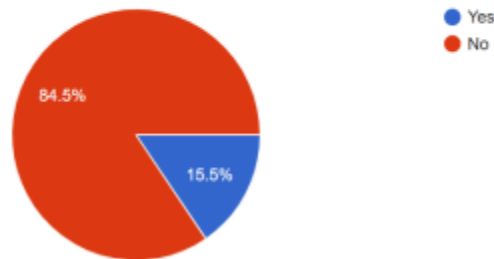


Fig. 6. Percentages of Respondents Voting for Promised Benefits

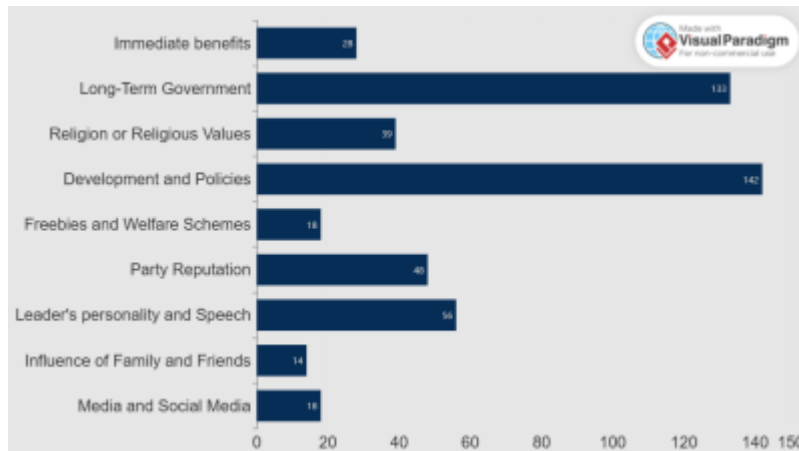


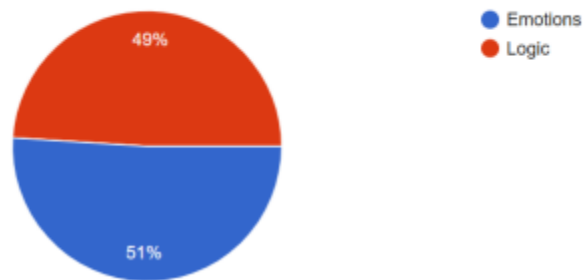
Fig. 7. Major Factors that Influence Voting Preferences

In spite of that, this number does not stand as insignificant. In a country where economic insecurity is a lived reality of millions, direct tangible welfare can act as a persuasive electoral tool, especially in regions with low literacy levels, where understanding complex political agendas might be a challenge. Within the system of India's realpolitik, where strategy often takes precedence over ideologies; freebies, especially when combined with emotional appeal, policy promises, and identity politics, can completely change expected outcomes. They cause ephemeral happiness, which can thus lead to confirmation bias. Thus, rather than defining voter behavior entirely, they become a part of incentives that political parties strategically deploy. The heart of the survey, though, was a simple question. It aimed at figuring out what citizens think voters make their choices based on- emotions or logic. It produced the most quietly deadly results. Responses from 200 Indians revealed that 51% of the respondents chose emotions, while 49% chose logic. This is not just data. It is not just coincidental. It is a psychological deadlock. This is a reflection of conflict that plays out inside each voter's mind, tracking a complex train of thoughts. These results don't represent two groups- rational vs. emotion. Rather, they represent each Indian voter as a whole. It shows us that an Indian voter is not rational or emotional. It is both, and perhaps, both at the same time.

Most people like to think of themselves as pragmatic. Reasonable. Rational. But the truth is many decisions, especially in the voting booth, are made in consideration of memory and emotion, unexplainable by reason and values which are unverifiable by facts.

**Do you think voters are more influenced by emotions or logic?**

200 responses



*Fig. 8. Logic vs. Emotion*

When voters start voting with an ephemeral thought process, we often blame it on emotion. However, emotion doesn't come with a warning label. It trickles its way in quietly, no matter how rational we think we're being. It can come as trust in a familiar name or as a flicker of pride induced by a national symbol, or as discomfort about changes in society. Its stealth is frustrating. We cannot fight something we might not even know is affecting our thinking. However, these statistics are proof that emotion does not overwhelm the voter as logic still persists in the mind, and thus continues this constant tug of war.

Having said that, logic holds its own. The fact that nearly half the respondents believe that people vote after weighing manifestos and analyzing policies shows that logic is considered essential by the voters. Those who voted for logic may be representing their aspirational self because to say that one votes rationally suggests maturity. It suggests traits that society desires. This tendency to portray oneself as a rational being, be it subconsciously, is called social desirability bias. What this suggests is that emotional voters can be logical as well. Logic is present. What seems to be changing is the relationship between how logic and emotion interact in a voter's mind. In older political dynamics, emotions were tied to identity, fear, and historical grievances. These emotional connections still exist and they still influence voting decisions, especially in areas where caste, religion, or regionalism are politicized.

Among younger and more digitally literate voters, however, another emotional logic can be seen. These voters are starting to embrace rational policies and are starting to form emotional connections to the said policies. A new railway line, infrastructure improvement, development of a new hospital, job creation are no longer dry agenda items. They resonate with people and spark excitement, pride, and connection. This shift is significant because it redefines what emotion really looks like in the political arena. Rather than it being the opposite of logic, emotion is starting to amplify it. For example, when voters feel strongly about long-term governance or clean governance, their vote will be both logically and emotionally charged. Through this, democracy is not being reduced to sentiment when it should be guided by logic, rather, it is democracy finding emotional value in reason to resonate with people.

Still, emotive campaigning cannot be dismissed. Political parties know how to trigger deep-rooted loyalties within people to bring out an entire group of people to stand with them. This is essentially why the 51%-49% split matters so much. It captures an entire nation stuck between a choice which is not between

logic and emotion, it is between emotional maturity and emotional manipulation. Voters are not becoming robots, and neither should they. They are humans. What is now evolving is the source of their emotional energy. They are moving away from rooted loyalties and moving towards aspirational development.

These results really challenged us to think about the voters and to feel about governance differently. It stands as a pillar to conclude that in the end, if emotion stands as a friend to reason rather than a foe, we may not have to choose between the two at all.

Moving on, religion's appearance in elections may or may not show up in ways we expect. When asked whether fear or hate towards a particular religious group affects the voting behavior in their area, almost 30% of the respondents said yes. This may seem like a staggering statistic, but what is more eye-catching is the statistic of the 43.5% of people who said that they were not sure. This uncertainty suggests that religion might be influencing votes in quieter ways. It usually isn't a blatant appeal. It may not show up with bold claims or particular policies. It can be subtle through talks of 'protecting traditions' or 'preserving our way of life.' It isn't just what people see or hear, it is what they sense. Whether a subtle appeal directly strikes a sensitive spot or not can make a huge difference. Political parties can use such subtle appeals to avoid facing backlash since no one would label these a call of religion (McLaughlin & Wise, 2014). There is a discomfort in naming it, which might point to less denial and more to the difficulty of isolating religion from everyday politics.

Another question showed a similar pattern. While most respondents said they had never voted based on religion, more than a third answered "maybe" or "not sure." That pause, that hesitation, suggests that while religious influence isn't always essential, it may work as an anchor tied to feelings of belonging and safety. And that is what makes it powerful. It may not be loud but it still prevails.

Do fear or hate towards a religious group affect people's votes in your area?

200 responses

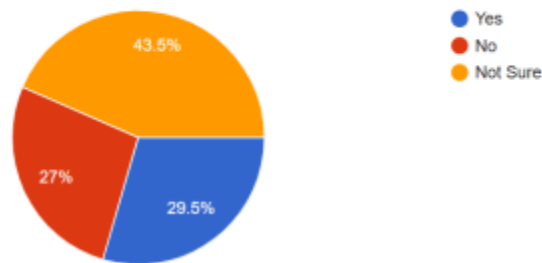


Fig. 9. Influence of Hate/Fear Towards a Particular Religion on Votes

## Conclusion

This survey opens a window into the minds of current and future Indian voters. Beneath percentages and statistics, lie thought processes that the findings and analysis of this survey give us insight into. Indian voters are not just stuck in the shackles of inherited identity anymore, they are constantly evolving and becoming more self aware, more reflective, as well as aspirational.

Democracy cannot be termed fully emotional, or perfectly rational. Instead, it is learning to balance both on the weighing scale. Emotion will not disappear. Rather, it is changing form. Logic, on the other hand, is not just dry. It carries emotional weight.

Still, contradictions do arise. Voters who deny being swayed by caste or religion may vote in favor of the party who makes such appeals, sometimes due to herd mentality. Freebie politics, however, have been rejected by a majority of respondents, especially the youth.

Following in the bandwagon effect, at times people align with dominant narratives or popular parties, not out of conviction or faith, but because “everyone is doing it.” This need to be on the “winning” side can lead to people not realizing that they have a borrowed preference, not an authentic one. Other than that, change can be a discomfort for many which can initiate status quo bias because with the same party in power, people know what to expect. This uninviting attitude to change reduces risk for people who aren’t willing to take it.

The survey truly shows us that Indian democracy is remarkable because here, a voter does not simply choose, he/she reacts. It shows us that voting is a deeply human act, not just showing us where voters stand or where they come from, but also where they want to go.

## Interview Analysis

This interview aims at outlining the primary views of Shailja Sachdeva, Mayor of Ambala. In this thoughtful conversation, Mayor Sachdeva provided a refreshing counter to the common assumptions made about the Indian Voter. She spoke from her political experience and as an active citizen, the fact that there is no single reason that can determine people’s vote in a country as vast and diverse as India. But if she was pressed to choose, she marginally favored caste and religion over everything else, citing the simple tendency of humans to relate to those who are similar to them.

What struck us most in her remarks was her unwavering faith in the Indian voter. Voters being swayed by emotions is a narrative that she vigorously pushed back, arguing that it simplifies the issue and underestimates voters, ignoring the fact that the electorate is far more sophisticated than the narrative being peddled. Emotions, in her opinion, are not always noble attempts to evoke pity or politicize identity; they are often the most efficient means of conveying policy and vision, particularly to an audience with varied education backgrounds. Ms. Sachdeva also mentioned that while identity does play a role, it acts at a more subconscious level. She recognized that even well-meaning voters may not acknowledge how much caste and religion influences them. However, she feels that the Indian voter is more aware of themselves these days and, in many cases, guided more by factors like policies and governance instead of identity and fear.

As for her approach to freebies, her position was clear. She believed that they should never be used unethically or as a bribe to induce voters and neither should they serve as a substitute for meaningful politics. Her focus on ethical politics made her critically disapprove of parties that used illicit inducements, highlighting the need to uphold fair and clean elections.

Perhaps the most hopeful part of her insight came while speaking about young voters. She characterized the youth as informed and deeply engaged with national issues, stating they were instigating a cultural change where voting would shift from blind loyalty to development focused decisions.

Mayor Sachdeva’s thinking really stood out to us and ultimately, she painted a picture of the Indian electorate that left us pondering. However, from her interview, we concluded that the Indian electorate is

far more capable and conscious than it is often given credit for. Emotional? Certainly. But also, equally rational and inspiringly evolving.

## Conclusion

Behind every vote cast in India, there is not just a political preference, there is a feeling that explains voting psychology. We started this research with a simple question: why do Indians vote the way they do? While working on answering that, we learnt a deeper truth. Rather than politicizing voters, we should think of them as humans first. Only then can we chase the pursuit of figuring out their psychological processes.

This paper unravels the riveting narratives of Indian voters. They are complex. They are not just influenced by a single nameable reason. They are influenced by who they are, where they come from, and who they aspire to be. They vote with reason, and they vote with emotion. They vote for policies, and they vote for caste and religion. This strange paradox, this clash of ideas, is there. It exists. However, it was moving to see people wanting to move forward; to break away from ingrained identities and to establish their, especially the youth. They are not perfect, but they are aware which is what makes the difference.

On comparing the survey findings with the secondary research findings, it has also become clear that voters don't always realize what they are being influenced by. Bandwagon thinking, herd mentality, fear of being different- it's all there. But not because the citizens are weak, but because they are human. This project was not just about collecting responses, it was more about listening to stories and from what we heard again and again, is that the voters care. They care about the relevant factors. They may sometimes be derailed while making their decisions, but in spite of that they are trying to stay on track and work towards, not a winning political party, but a winning India.

This shows us that Indian democracy is still alive, sometimes messy and flawed, sometimes reasonable and balanced. This is what makes it worth understanding and worth believing in.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Citizen Survey

Hi! My name is Rahini Bansal and this questionnaire is part of a Class 11 research project I am working on. The project aimed at understanding why Indians vote the way they do. Your responses will remain anonymous and will be used for academic purposes only. Please answer honestly!

#### 1. Age

- Below 18
- 18-25
- 25-35
- 35-45
- 45-55
- 55-65
- Above 65

#### 2. Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

#### 3. Which state do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Do you reside in an urban or rural area?

- Urban
- Rural

#### 5. What is your education level?

- No Formal Education
- Primary School
- Secondary School
- Graduate
- Post Graduate or Higher

#### 6. Do you believe your caste/community influences your voting decision?

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

#### 7. How often do you vote for a candidate belonging to your caste/community?

- Always



- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**8. Have you ever voted for a party because it promised benefits (e.g. free ration, cash, jobs)?**

- Yes
- No

**9. What matters more to you when voting? (choose up to 3)**

- Immediate Benefits
- Long-term Governance
- Religion or Religious Values
- Development and Policies
- Freebies and Welfare Schemes
- Party Reputation
- Leader's Personality and Speech
- Influence of Family and Friends
- Media and Social Media

**10. Do you feel emotionally influenced (fear, pride, hope) during election campaigns?**

- Always
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

**11. Have you ever changed your vote due to a community/local leader's opinion?**

- Yes
- No

**12. Do fear or hate towards a religious group affect people's votes in your area?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**13. Have you ever voted (or would vote) based on religion-related appeals made by politicians?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Not sure

**14. Do you think voters are more influenced by emotions or logic?**

- Emotions
- Logic

**15. Which of these, in your opinion, influences an Indian voter's decision the most?**

- Caste
- Freebies
- Fear
- Faith

**16. In your opinion, what is the biggest psychological factor that shapes the Indian voter's decision? \_\_\_\_\_**

## **Appendix 2**

**Mayor Shailja Sachdeva**

### **Interview Transcript**

**Question — In your experience, what is the single strongest factor that drives Indian voting behavior, caste, religion, freebies, or fear? Why?**

Answer — In my experience of not just contesting in elections but being an active citizen of the Indian Democracy, and watching past many elections be it national or state, it is difficult to identify the single strongest behaviour as Indians we make up for the world's largest democracy and with so many voters each making up their own mind and voting for their preferred candidate it's not ideal to point to one however, if I were to rank the options I would say first is Caste & Religion simply because of the human nature of affinity, when we relate to someone on any grounds we tend to like that person.

**Question — How do you think emotional appeals during campaigns affect voter decision-making compared to policy-based appeals?**

Answer — In my opinion to underestimate the Indian Voter and think emotional appeals over power policy-based appeals wouldn't be right. However, I do not deny that they do play a strong part in appeasing the voters as some emotional appeals are simply a way of storytelling for a policy appeal. It is easier to explain to the voters what a candidate stands for when they talk in layman terms because not all the voting diaspora would be learned enough to understand the nuances of policy-based appeals.

**Question — Do you believe Indian voters are consciously aware of how their identities (like caste or religion) influence their vote, or is it more subconscious?**

Answer — As a voter of the largest democracy of the world, I wouldn't have a definitive answer to this question given Indian Voters vote consciously but as humans certain aspects do affect the subconscious minds of all of us.

**Question — How significant is the role of media and political rhetoric in amplifying fear or pride during elections? Have you seen this shift in recent years?**

Answer — Media is the fourth pillar of any democracy and in the world's largest democracy Media's Role in any elections can never be underestimated. The media is an independent pillar of the nation and they just present facts and do not support any political party so to spread fear or pride during elections wouldn't be in their course of action. In recent years with the rise of social media and other digital platforms the common citizen of the country has become more aware of the news, events, and happenings around them, so they fact check on most news to make an informed decision.

**Question — Freebies are often criticized, yet they remain effective. Do you see them as manipulative, necessary, or a mix of both?**

Answer — Freebies might be effective as stated in your question, however in my experience as both a responsible citizen and a public representative, I have never taken part in any exchange of freebies so wouldn't have the right info to comment. However, looking at past elections, parties who give out illegal freebies should definitely be dealt with in a strict manner.

**Question — In your observation, are young voters moving away from identity based voting toward development and governance? Or is the pattern largely unchanged?**

Answer — The youth of India is the largest young diaspora today across the globe and to that effect the youth is not only well learned but also with the rise of digital media pretty involved in the matters involving the state, elections are a part of which. Identity based voting could have multiple interpretations like, caste/religion as discussed above or identity of thought, behaviour in both scenarios the youth today understand the depth and nuances and vote accordingly.

**Question — In your view, when it comes to voting, does logic truly guide the Indian voter, or do emotional factors like fear, pride, and loyalty usually overpower rational thinking?**

Answer — I believe the Indian Voter is a very learned voter and makes thought through decisions.

**Question — What do you believe is the biggest misconception about the Indian voter? What do we often get wrong when analyzing voter psychology?**

Answer — The biggest misconception about the India voter is that it is emotionally charged and makes decisions based on emotional factors. The Indian Voter today is learned and knows that the current government, working for them, is the right one and that a very strong pillar of any democracy is the opposition which stands weak, not only in its resolve but also in its members and leaders.