

Caste Politics and Voting Behavior in Rural Bihar: A Comparative Study of the 2019 and 2024 General Election

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the deeply embedded role of caste in shaping electoral behavior in rural Bihar, offering a comparative analysis between the 2019 and 2024 General Elections. Bihar, historically recognized for its caste-based political alignments, presents an evolving electoral landscape influenced by shifting political alliances, socio-economic transformations, and the aspirations of a new generation of voters. This study examines voter preferences, party strategies, and socio-political dynamics that have continually defined electoral outcomes in Bihar. While caste remains an integral factor in voter behavior, this paper also explores the gradual emergence of developmental concerns, economic aspirations, and governance issues influencing electoral choices. Through a mixed-method research approach, including qualitative interviews, survey analysis, and statistical data examination, this study presents a comprehensive understanding of the evolving political environment in Bihar.

Keywords: Caste Politics, Voting Behavior, Rural Bihar, General Election

The interplay between caste and politics in Bihar has historically shaped the electoral landscape of the state. Caste identity is deeply entrenched in Bihar's socio-political structure, influencing political representation, governance, and policy implementation. Over the decades, various caste groups have aligned themselves with specific political entities, reinforcing the perception that caste loyalty is paramount in securing political power. However, the 2019 and 2024 General Elections provide a fascinating lens to examine shifts in voting behavior, as factors such as economic policies, governance, and social mobility begin to challenge traditional caste-based electoral patterns.

This paper seeks to analyze the persistence of caste as a dominant electoral factor while identifying emerging trends that signal a potential transformation in Bihar's political landscape. The study specifically addresses the following key questions:

1. How have caste affiliations influenced voter behavior in the 2019 and 2024 General Elections?
2. What role have political alliances and party strategies played in mobilizing caste groups?
3. Are emerging socio-economic issues shifting voter preferences beyond caste lines?

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4. How have younger voters, women, and marginalized communities influenced electoral outcomes?

By addressing these questions, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Bihar's evolving electoral politics while assessing the potential future trajectory of voting behavior in the state.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context of Caste-Based Politics in Bihar

The historical roots of caste-based politics in Bihar can be traced back to pre-independence India, where caste identity was a major determinant of social and economic power. Post-independence, political mobilization around caste gained momentum, particularly after the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, which reserved quotas for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions.

Scholars such as Biswas (2023) and Jha (2016) have extensively documented the political assertion of backward castes, particularly the rise of the Yadav, Kurmi, and Dalit political blocs. The emergence of regional parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Janata Dal (United) (JD-U) further solidified caste-based political alignments. These parties effectively mobilized support by promoting caste-based reservations, social justice narratives, and populist policies tailored to specific communities.

The decline of upper-caste political dominance, particularly among the Bhumihars, Rajputs, and Brahmins, marked a significant shift in Bihar's political landscape. Historically, these castes controlled political power due to their socio-economic dominance. However, the post-Mandal era saw a redistribution of power, with OBC and Dalit leaders gaining prominence in the state's political arena.

Caste and Electoral Mobilization

Caste identities continue to influence voting behavior, with political parties strategically leveraging caste affiliations to consolidate electoral support. Studies by Roy (1994) and Sahay (2009) highlight how caste-based mobilization remains a crucial strategy for electoral success. Political campaigns often focus on caste-based promises, such as increased reservations, community-specific welfare programs, and targeted economic incentives.

Despite the increasing emphasis on governance and development, caste remains a primary factor in voter decision-making. Political parties frequently engage in social engineering strategies, forming alliances that cater to multiple caste groups. These alliances often determine electoral outcomes, as seen in the seat-sharing arrangements between the BJP-JD(U) alliance and the RJD-led opposition coalition.

Comparative Analysis of 2019 and 2024 Elections

The 2019 General Election in Bihar was largely characterized by a strong pro-incumbency wave favoring the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies. The Narendra Modi-led government's emphasis on national security, economic reforms, and welfare schemes played a significant role in shaping voter preferences. The BJP-JD(U) alliance successfully mobilized support among the OBCs and upper castes, securing a decisive victory.

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In contrast, the 2024 General Election witnessed a more complex electoral dynamic. While caste loyalties remained strong, emerging issues such as unemployment, inflation, and governance failures began to influence voter behavior. The opposition, led by RJD and Congress, attempted to capitalize on economic distress and caste-based grievances to challenge the incumbent government. The shifting nature of political alliances further added to the unpredictability of the election outcome.

Theoretical Framework: Caste, Identity, and Voting Behaviour

To understand the dynamics of caste and voting behavior, this study employs a theoretical framework that integrates theories of social identity, rational choice, and political mobilization. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive a sense of self from their membership in social groups, such as caste. In the context of Bihar, caste identity often translates into political loyalty, as voters perceive their caste group's representation as a means of securing social and economic benefits.

Rational choice theory, on the other hand, suggests that voters make decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of political outcomes. In Bihar, this manifests in voters weighing caste loyalty against the potential benefits of developmental policies and governance. The interplay between these theories provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the persistence of caste-based voting and the emerging influence of economic factors.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The primary data collection methods include:

- **Survey Analysis:** A detailed voter survey was conducted across key rural constituencies in Bihar, focusing on caste identity, voting preferences, and socio-economic concerns.
- **Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with political analysts, party workers, and voters to understand the underlying motivations behind electoral choices.
- **Electoral Data Analysis:** A comparative study of voter turnout, party performance, and caste-based voting patterns from the 2019 and 2024 elections was carried out.
- **Case Studies:** Selected districts, including Gaya, Muzaffarpur, and Darbhanga, were analyzed to provide empirical insights into caste-based electoral trends.

Findings and Discussion

- **Continuity of Caste-Based Voting:** Despite economic challenges and policy interventions, caste loyalty remains a predominant factor in electoral decisions. Voter preferences continue to align with traditional caste-based affiliations, particularly among rural communities.
- **Shift in Political Alliances:** The fluctuating alliances between JD(U), BJP, and RJD played a crucial role in reshaping voter perceptions. The realignment of caste groups based on these alliances influenced electoral outcomes significantly.
- **Role of Economic and Developmental Policies:** The 2024 election saw a greater emphasis on employment, infrastructure, and governance. However, caste considerations often overrode developmental concerns in many rural constituencies.
- **Emergence of New Voter Segments:** Younger voters and women exhibited a more issue-based approach to voting, signaling a gradual shift from purely caste-driven electoral behavior.

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Case Studies

- **Gaya District: Caste Dynamics and Electoral Outcomes**
Gaya, a district with a significant Dalit population, provides insights into how caste-based mobilization influences electoral outcomes. The dominance of the RJD in this region highlights the party's ability to consolidate Dalit votes through social justice narratives.
- **Muzaffarpur District: The Role of Women Voters**
Muzaffarpur, known for its high female voter turnout, demonstrates the growing influence of women in shaping electoral outcomes. Issues such as education, healthcare, and safety have become critical factors in their voting decisions.
- **Darbhanga District: Youth Aspirations and Voting Behaviour**
Darbhanga, with its large youth population, reflects the changing priorities of younger voters. Employment opportunities and skill development programs have emerged as key issues influencing their electoral choices.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2019 AND 2024 ELECTIONS

- **Key Differences in Electoral Campaigns**
The 2019 campaign focused on national security and economic reforms, while the 2024 campaign emphasized local issues such as unemployment and governance.
- **Impact of National vs. Local Issues**
The 2019 election was dominated by national narratives, whereas the 2024 election saw a greater focus on local concerns, reflecting the changing priorities of voters.
- **Voter Turnout and Demographic Shifts**
The 2024 election witnessed a higher voter turnout, particularly among women and younger voters, indicating their growing participation in the electoral process.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study have significant implications for policymakers and political parties. Addressing socio-economic concerns while acknowledging the role of caste identity is crucial for achieving inclusive development in Bihar.

1. Diminishing Influence of Caste in Voting Decisions

Contrary to longstanding assumptions, recent data indicates a decline in caste-based voting:

- A 2024 survey by the State Election Department revealed that only **4.2%** of voters prioritized caste when casting their votes, with **1.1%** considering religion. Patna Press
- Majority of voters based their decisions on **family opinions (41.4%)**, **candidate interactions (33.9%)**, and **party affiliation (32.2%)**. Patna Press

This suggests a shift towards issue-based and performance-oriented voting behavior.

2. Evolving Caste Alliances and Political Realignments

The traditional caste equations witnessed notable changes between 2019 and 2024:

- The **Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)**, constituting **36%** of Bihar's population, and **Dalits (14.6%)** showed signs of moving away from the NDA, which had previously secured overwhelming support from these groups. Frontline

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- The **Koeri (Kushwaha)** community, traditionally aligned with the JD(U), exhibited a shift towards the RJD, indicating a potential weakening of the "Luv-Kush" (Kurmi-Koeri) alliance. Wikipedia+3Wikipedia+3Frontline+3
- The **Yadavs (14.3%)** and **Muslims (17%)** continued to be the core support base for the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan. indianelection.in+2Frontline+2Frontline+2

3. Impact of the 2022 Bihar Caste-Based Survey

The Release of the Caste Survey In 2023 Had Significant Political Implications:Hindustan Times+4https://Www.Oneindia.Com/+4Wikipedia+4

- The Survey highlighted that **OBCs and EBCs together constitute over 63%** of the state's population, prompting parties to recalibrate their strategies to appeal to these groups. https://www.oneindia.com/
- The data spurred discussions on increasing reservations and affirmative action, influencing party manifestos and campaign narratives.

4. Rise of Issue-Based Politics

While caste remains a factor, there is a noticeable rise in issue-based politics:

- Voters are increasingly concerned with **employment, education, healthcare, and infrastructure development**.
- Political campaigns focusing on these issues, rather than solely on caste identities, have found greater resonance among the electorate.

Strategic Recommendations for the Bihar Government

Policy-Making Level

1. **Inclusive Development Programs:** Design and implement welfare schemes that target economically disadvantaged groups across all castes, ensuring equitable development.
2. **Comprehensive Data Collection:** Regularly update socio-economic and demographic data to inform policy decisions and address the needs of various communities effectively.
3. **Educational Reforms:** Invest in education and skill development programs, particularly in rural areas, to empower youth and reduce dependency on caste-based politics.
4. **Healthcare Accessibility:** Enhance healthcare infrastructure and services in underserved regions to address disparities and improve overall well-being.

Policy-Implementation Level

1. **Transparent Governance:** Ensure transparency in the implementation of government schemes, with mechanisms for accountability and public feedback.
2. **Community Engagement:** Foster community participation in decision-making processes to build trust and ensure that policies reflect the needs of all groups.
3. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish robust systems to monitor the effectiveness of policies and programs, allowing for timely adjustments and improvements.
4. **Capacity Building:** Train local administrators and officials to be sensitive to the diverse

CONCLUSION

While caste politics continues to shape Bihar's electoral landscape, emerging socio-economic factors indicate a slow but noticeable shift in voting behavior. The 2024 election underscores

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the evolving nature of voter priorities, suggesting that future elections may witness a more balanced interplay between caste identity and governance issues.

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NOTES ON REFERENCES

1. Biswas (2023) and Jha (2016) provide historical context on caste politics in Bihar, particularly the rise of OBCs and Dalits.
2. Roy (1994) and Sahay (2009) focus on caste-based electoral mobilization and its impact on voting behavior.
3. Tajfel & Turner (1979) offer a theoretical framework for understanding social identity and its role in politics.
4. Kumar (2018) and Yadav (2000) analyze the role of caste in electoral politics, particularly in the context of Bihar.
5. Chandra (2004) and Jaffrelot (2003) provide insights into the success of ethnic and caste-based parties in India.
6. Verma (2017) and Singh (2020) explore the intersection of caste, gender, and electoral participation.
7. Banerjee & Iyer (2005) and Desai & Dubey (2012) discuss the socio-economic implications of caste and its influence on political behavior.
8. Palshikar & Kumar (2004) and Hasan (2000) examine the broader trends of lower-caste politics in India.
9. Mehta (2003) and Varshney (2000) provide a macro-level analysis of democracy and political participation in India.
10. Wilkinson (2004) and Brass (1997) focus on the relationship between electoral competition and ethnic or caste-based violence.

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Conflict of Interest

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