

Understanding Voter Preferences: An Investigation Into Nota Voting Patterns In The 2018 Assembly Election Of Chhattisgarh

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Abstract

Voter participation plays a crucial role in the functioning of democratic systems, and the incorporation of a "None of the Above" (NOTA) alternative in electoral processes holds promise for augmenting voter engagement. This study examines the phenomena of None of the Above (NOTA) voting trends within the specific context of the 2018 Assembly Election of Chhattisgarh. This study elucidates major patterns pertaining to the electoral process and democratic engagement in the state through an analysis of voter behaviour, demographic factors, and regional differences. The results indicate that votes for None of the Above (NOTA) carry a greater level of importance beyond simply symbolic representation, serving as a reflection of the dissatisfaction and discontent expressed by a segment of the voting population. The effects of the None of the Above (NOTA) option differ depending on geographical regions and demographic groupings, highlighting the necessity of implementing customised approaches to successfully tackle these issues. Moreover, it offers valuable insights that can contribute to the formulation of informed policy choices and serve as a guiding framework for future investigations in the field of voter preferences. In essence, the study adds to a more profound understanding of voter behaviour and its capacity to improve democratic processes, not only in Chhattisgarh but also in other regions.

(Keywords: NOTA voting, voter preferences, Chhattisgarh Assembly Election 2018, electoral dynamics)

Introduction

Voter involvement is essential to democracy (United Nations human Right Commission, 2018). The addition of a NOTA button can boost voter turnout during an election (Mandal et al., 2016). Voters' engagement in elections represents their

participation in democracy as a whole. In a developing democracy like India, non-participation fosters discontent and apathy, neither of which are positive indicators. For democracy to flourish, the best available individual must be elected as the people's representative to ensure effective governance (V R Vachana, 2018). Thus, in a democracy, voters must be given the option of selecting the 'None of the Above' (NOTA) button, which will push political parties to nominate someone who is credible. This circumstance clearly demonstrates the critical necessity for negative voting.

On September 27, 2013, the Indian Supreme Court declared that voters should have the option to cast a "none of the above" ballot during elections, and it compelled the Election Commission to include a button for this purpose on all electronic voting machines (Venkatesan, 2013).

The NOTA option allows voters to voice their dissatisfaction with the candidates put up by political parties (Subekti et al., 2023). When political parties find that a considerable number of individuals are voicing their dissatisfaction with the candidates put up by them, Eventually, a structural shift is expected to occur, and political parties will be obliged to accept the will of the people and field candidates who will be acknowledged for their honesty and clean image (Tiwari & Dwivedi, 2014).

The state has a diverse collection of communities and tribes, each of which maintains its own set of customs, rituals, and celebrations, contributing to the state's rich cultural heritage. The tribal community in Chhattisgarh accounts for about 30.62% and schedule caste 12.82% of the total population (Election Commission of India, 2013). Gond, Korba, Oraon, Baiga, Kamar, and Halba are notable examples of important tribal communities that can be found in this state. These communities are characterised by a variety of linguistic varieties, cultural practises, and ways of life.

After serving as the opposition for 15 years, the Indian National Congress won an overwhelming majority, taking 68 seats to the BJP's 15 and forming the government in the state. Overall voter turnover in the State was estimated to be 76.35 percent, a little decrease from 77.40 percent in 2013 (Chhattisgarh Assembly Elections 2018 Analysis of Vote Share, Margin of Victory and Representativeness of Winners, 2019). The total of 38 seats registered a turnout of more than 80%, the majority of which were located predominantly in rural regions. The highest

turnout was recorded in Kurud (88.99%), followed by Kharsiya (86.81%), while the lowest was in Bijapur (44.68%) (Election Commission of India, 2018).

Research Objectives

- a) To understand the geographical distribution of NOTA votes.
- b) To investigate the crucial role NOTA plays in promoting democratic values and voter participation.

Methodology

The Given study is focused on the use of NOTA Votes by voter in the assembly election 2018 in the state of Chhattisgarh. The Chhattisgarh was chosen for study because of the distinct voter behaviour as compare to general perception under the Modi wave in rest of the country. The state has elected congress party despite of the Modi effect all over the country. The given study is based on the data collected from the Election commission of India website and other data available in public domain.

Observations

The None of The Above (NOTA) option saw its debut in the 2013 assembly elections in the states of Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. With each passing election its votes share is constantly increasing and gaining popularity in the pan-India. In the 2018 assembly elections in the five states of Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Telangana, NOTA saw a big jump of total 8.44 lakh voters. And it's become more interesting that NOTA had a total of 2.1 percent of votes in 90 seat assembly election of Chhattisgarh in the year 2018, highest among all states. One can argue that in the state of Chhattisgarh NOTA did make a difference in the assembly election results as in the absence of this option a majority of voters would have preferred one or the other candidate.

Table 1 Total number of NOTA in Constituencies

Constituencies	ST Reserved	SC Reserved	Un-Reserved	Total
Total number of NOTA	146524	27552	108662	282738
Percentage of total NOTA	51.82%	9.74%	38.43%	100%

votes distribution				
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(Source-Election Commission of India)

A detailed analysis of NOTA usage in 2018 assembly elections of Chhattisgarh does suggest some interesting early pointers. First, reserved constituencies have seen a larger number of NOTA votes than the unreserved seats. A total of 1,74,076 NOTA votes were cast in the 39 reserved seats out of 90 seats in 2018 assembly elections of Chhattisgarh. Whereas, only 1,08,662 NOTA votes were cast in the 51 unreserved seats which are much lesser than the reserved seats NOTA votes share. All 39 reserved seats had an average of 3.09% of NOTA votes out of the total valid votes on the contrary all other unreserved seats had just 1.30% of NOTA votes out of total valid votes.

Table 2 Average Percentage of NOTA in Constituencies

Constituencies	ST Reserved	SC Reserved	Un- Reserved
Average % of NOTA (out of total valid votes cast)	3.60%	1.64%	1.30%

(Source-Election Commission of India)

This indicates towards the continued social prejudice against political reservation for SC/STs. There is a one more noteworthy fact that the NOTA votes cast were comparatively higher in ST reserved seats than in SC reserved seats. An average of 3.60% of NOTA votes were cast in total 29 assembly constituencies reserved for ST. On the contrary, an average of 1.64% of NOTA votes were cast in 10 assembly constituencies reserved for SC. It can be one more social prejudice against ST candidates in their own tribal state. Like the assembly constituencies of Dantewada, Chitrakot, Narayanpur, Samri, Keshkal figured in the list of top NOTA polling assembly constituencies and all of these seats are reserved for ST candidates.

Second, the constituencies affected by the left-wing extremism have seen a higher NOTA performance as compared to other peaceful constituencies. Most naxalism affected region of Chhattisgarh whether it is the hard naxal hit areas of Dantewada, Bastar, Narayanpur, Chitrakot, Bijapur, Kondagaon, Konta, Keshkal, Mohla-Manpur have seen much larger share of NOTA votes as compared to other peaceful constituencies. Here probably it can be seen as a protest and discontent among

the people against the state. In these regions NOTA can also be seen as a democratic way of resentment rather directly boycotting the election polling.

Third, the constituencies falling in the rural belt have comparatively seen a larger NOTA votes than in the urban side whether its in the case of reserved area or in the unreserved area. The assembly constituencies of Saja, Pandariya, Kota, Kurud, Gunderdehi, Rajim have seen some of the highest NOTA votes share in the unreserved areas and interestingly all of these constituencies fall on the rural side of Chhattisgarh. Similarly, all those constituencies of the reserved area which have seen larger NOTA votes also falls under the hard-core rural belt of Chhattisgarh. Here we can observe that the NOTA votes saw a decreasing trend as the region get urbanised. So hypothetically it can be said that there is no direct relation between literacy and NOTA.

Last, NOTA votes are comparatively higher in those constituencies where there is direct contest between two parties. One may read it as dissatisfaction among the people for the two mainstream parties and a desire for alternative. It is a noteworthy and interesting fact that in a total of 15 assembly constituencies out of 90 assembly constituencies seats have seen NOTA option as a 3rd alternative leaving behind many national and regional political parties. These constituencies include the seats of Lundra (ST), Sitapur (ST), Kunkuri(ST), Pathalgaon(ST), Kharsia, Dharamjaigarh(ST), Saraipali(SC), Raipur City South, Dongargaon, Keshkal(ST), Kondagaon(ST), Narayanpur(ST), Bastar(ST), Chitrakot(ST), Bijapur(ST). It can be seen as a demand for 3rd alternative and democratically a way of 'right to reject'.

Discussion

The higher percentage of NOTA (None of the Above) votes in Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved constituencies in the Chhattisgarh Assembly elections in 2018 can be attributed to several reasons.

Discontent with political parties:

Voters in reserved ST/SC districts may have been dissatisfied with the performance and results of mainstream political parties. They may have felt neglected by these political parties, prompting them to use the NOTA option to express their discontent. Extreme destitution and a difficult existence force them to choose NOTA. People may believe that other parties

and candidates are incapable of addressing their problems because they believe that the mainstream parties are not committed to addressing their issues. They vote for NOTA because they've lost optimism and trust in the two major political parties.

Lack of effective representation:

Despite the reservation system, elected representatives may have been perceived as inadequately representing the interests and concerns of ST/SC communities. This sense of underrepresentation may have prompted electors to select NOTA as a means of expressing their frustration. In contrast to the reserved seats, the few unreserved seats also have a large number of NOTA, which may be due to the fact that their candidates were not adequately represented or inclusive.

Anti-incumbency sentiment:

There seems to be a prevailing feeling of anti-incumbency observed in some constituencies, where the incumbent governments or representatives have faced difficulties in delivering their promises or effectively addressing the unique needs of the ST/SC community. The widespread attitude of dissatisfaction with incumbents may have motivated voters to utilise the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option as a means of expressing their displeasure with the current pool of candidates.

The inclusion of the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option in electoral systems provides voters with a distinct opportunity to express their dissent against the existing pool of candidates, while also engaging in the electoral procedure. The None of the Above (NOTA) option functions as a means for citizens to express their dissatisfaction with the available electoral options without resorting to complete abstention from voting.

Voting as a Form of Protest:

The None of the Above (NOTA) option is considered as a means to express a negative vote, particularly in areas where voters perceive a lack of viable candidates. In such circumstances, voters may consciously choose the None of the Above (NOTA) option as a way to express their discontent with the restricted and perceived insufficient pool of choices.

The use of None of the Above (NOTA) as a means of protest highlights the importance of guaranteeing a strong and varied selection of candidates that are able to address the diverse

interests and demands of the voting population. It functions as an indicator of public opinion, drawing attention to situations where voters perceive a discrepancy between the available candidates and the urgent matters that require representation. The inclusion of the None of the Above (NOTA) option in the electoral process serves to emphasise the importance of a diverse and representative group of candidates who can effectively address the varied demands of the population, thus contributing to a robust democratic system.

Aspirational gap:

The current situation brings attention to a notable and relevant issue, specifically the gap in aspirations that often arises within seats allocated for Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes. These regions, which frequently suffer complex socio-economic concerns, are currently facing a critical juncture when the candidates proposed by different political parties appear to have failed in effectively and thoroughly addressing the diverse problems afflicting these people.

There is a growing realisation that the candidates put forth by political organisations may not have effectively aligned their backgrounds and policies with the deeply ingrained desires of the local population. The divergence of goals and viewpoints has resulted in a significant phenomenon whereby a notable portion of the voting population has decided to exercise their democratic privilege by selecting the 'None of the Above' (NOTA) choice on the voting ballot.

The justification for this course of action is based on the belief that the candidates in question have not exhibited an extensive understanding of, or dedication to, the complex array of difficulties associated with socio-economic advancement, fair distribution of resources, educational empowerment, and preservation of culture that hold significant significance for the ST/SC reserved areas. As a result, there exists a noticeable disparity between the methods provided by the candidates and the true objectives of the voters, which has resulted in an increase in the use of the None of the Above (NOTA) option as a means to express this displeasure.

Caste dynamics:

In certain seats designated for Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes, candidates are occasionally nominated primarily on the basis of their caste affiliation rather than their qualifications or ability. This strategy may potentially contribute to a diminished

level of voter enthusiasm, thereby leading to an increase in the percentages of votes cast for the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option.

The level of awareness and knowledge among voters has increased throughout time, leading to a greater understanding of their rights and the intricacies of the political process. With the proliferation of education and heightened consciousness among voters, it is possible that a portion of the electorate may have opted for the "None of the Above" (NOTA) option as a mechanism to assert their desire for improved candidates and enhanced governmental accountability.

The candidates may not have adequately addressed localised challenges, such as insufficient infrastructure, limited access to education, healthcare, and employment prospects, which can have a significant impact on the community. The aforementioned factor may have contributed to the growing propensity towards the None of the Above (NOTA) option as a means to express the need for improved governance.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the factors contributing to larger percentages of None of the Above (NOTA) votes might differ throughout elections and may be shaped by the regional political context, candidates' characteristics, and the prevailing socio-economic circumstances inside the reserved constituencies for Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes (ST/SC).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has provided useful insights into the dynamics of voter preferences in the 2018 Assembly Election of Chhattisgarh, with a special focus on the NOTA (None of the Above) voting patterns. These insights have been presented as a result of the 2018 Assembly Election of Chhattisgarh. We were able to unearth major trends and their ramifications for both the electoral process and the democratic landscape in Chhattisgarh by doing research on voter behaviour, demographic factors, and geographical variations. These findings have repercussions for both arenas. Our research leads us to believe that votes for "none of the above" are not only symbolic; rather, they are illustrative of the discontent and dissatisfaction felt by a portion of the voting population. In addition, the influence of NOTA differs across various geographical locations and demographic subgroups, which highlights the necessity of developing individualised ways to address these challenges. This study highlights the

need of connecting with voters and addressing their issues to enhance the democratic foundation that our society is built upon. As we continue to examine and comprehend the complicated world of election preferences, this study highlights the importance of engaging with voters. In the end, this research contributes to our more comprehensive understanding of voter behaviour and has the potential to serve as an invaluable resource for policymakers, political analysts, and anyone else interested in advancing the democratic process in Chhattisgarh and beyond.

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