



An Instance of Proxy Voting: A Case Study of Saikot Ac, Manipur

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ABSTRACT

From differences in polling dates to indifferences in representative voting, the 12th Manipur Legislative Assembly Election remains unchanged. The National Elderly Policy defines the term elderly as a person who is or above 60 years of age. So, basic calculation suggests that the elderly have voted for the ninth time around. If the adage 'old age is wisdom' is still valid, it becomes compelling to study the voting behaviour of the elderly. The objective of the study is to understand the extent of elderly participation in election, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Research Methodology adopted is qualitative in nature. It is confined to a group numbering 100-200 participants. Research approach follows an 'inductive model'. The method of collecting data and tools is based on 'Structured- Personal Interview'. Significant findings out of research in the Saikot Assembly Constituency (A/C) are proxy voting for the elderly, the elderly's dissatisfaction with the ruling government. Also, social media as a manufacturer of consent is found to rarely apply to the elderly. The author's opinion is that if election is feasible for 60 A/Cs, dignified participation ought to be feasible for the 60 years and above too.

KEYWORDS: Elderly; Election; Democracy; Proxy Voting; tender ballot; COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION:

Election Commission of India (ECI) is a constitutional body incorporated in Article 324 of the Indian Constitution. B.R. Ambedkar proposed for a centralized Election Commission (EC). According to him, a decentralized EC body will threaten the rights of the minority as the state government might try and subvert the electoral processes. The history of the Election Commission of India has been a mixture of ups and downs. It has maintained a centralized bureaucratic role in the first general election in India where Sukumar Sen, the first election commissioner of India, toured the entire country. He met a popular reception to the extent that a voter remarked "I want to vote for Sukumar Sen". But the decentralized bureaucratic nature of the body also featured in different intervals thereby threatening the rights of the minority. Recently, the Election Commission of India was insensitive of the Christian minorities in Manipur when the scheduled polling dates of Phase 1 falls on Sunday. But changes were made when the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and church organizations appeal against it. Taking inspiration from this episode, the problems faced by elderly in their participation in the election merits the same level of attention and affection. Some of the problems related to election faced by the elderly are, proxy voting for the elderly is widely practiced; their experienced based opinions are overshadowed by the opinions of the younger voters.

CONCEPT OF PROXY VOTING:

Voting in an Indian election can be done in three ways - in person, by post or through a proxy. Under proxy voting, a registered elector can delegate his/her voting power to a representative. This was introduced in 2003 for Lok Sabha and Assemblies elections, but on a limited scale. Only a "classified service voter" is allowed to nominate a proxy to cast vote on his/her behalf. The definition includes members of the armed forces, BSF, CRPF, CISF, General Engineering Reserve Force and Border Road Organisation. A classified service voter can also vote by postal ballot. Lok Sabha recently passed the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, 2017, to allow NRIs to use proxies to cast votes on their behalf. A 12-member committee

was set up in 2014 to study mainly three options for voting by NRIs (non-resident Indians). These include voting by post, voting at an Indian mission abroad and online voting. The committee ruled out online polling as this could compromise “secrecy of voting”. It also ruled out voting at Indian missions abroad as they do not have the resources to organise polling. In 2015, the panel finally recommended that NRIs be given the “additional alternative options of e-postal ballot and proxy voting”. This is apart from the option of casting their vote in person. E-postal ballot is a ballot paper that is sent to the voter electronically and returned to the returning officer by post. The Law Ministry accepted the recommendation on proxy voting and the Cabinet passed the proposal to amend the law. The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, 2017 proposes to amend the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. It stipulates the physical presence of the overseas electors in the respective polling station. This is a limitation for overseas electors in exercising their franchise. Notably, India’s diaspora population, being 16 million, is the largest in the world. But the registration of NRI voters has been relatively lower than this. The Bill thus aims at extending the facility of proxy voting to Indian voters living abroad. Once passed by both houses, Election Commission will amend the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. This will lay down the procedure by which NRIs could nominate their proxies. Currently, the classified service voters’ proxy has to be a registered voter in the same constituency. The proxy is appointed through Form 13F, signed by the voter and the appointed proxy. This is done before a first-class magistrate or notary or the commanding officer of the service voter. The form has to be submitted to the returning officer of the seat before the nomination of candidates closes. The proxy will continue to represent the service voter for all polls until the service or the appointment is revoked.

Two international examples are worthy of mention:

UK - A British citizen living abroad can either travel back to vote in person or vote by post. He/she can also nominate a proxy, but this is subject to eligibility rules. This accounts the expatriate’s period of stay abroad and the period for which the voter was registered in the UK. Those who were minors at the time of leaving the country can also vote. But this is only as long as their parent or guardian was registered to vote in the UK.

US - Expatriates can vote for federal office candidates in primary and general elections. This is, notably, irrespective of how long they have been living abroad. Once registered, an overseas American voter will receive a ballot paper by email, fax, or download, depending on the US state. This has to be returned the same way as received.

METHODOLOGY/ THEORY:

The Research Methodology defines what the activity of the research is, how to proceed, how to measure progress, and what constitutes success. It helps in developing a critical and scientific attitude, an organized pattern of viewing the world. In this research, in-depth interviews were used. In- depth interviews comprise of personal and structured interviews. Personal interviews enable the direct contact between the interviewers and the interviewees. It also minimises the non-response rate. Structured interviews contain a pre-determined question. It follows a rigid procedure whereby the conclusions are drawn from the premise given in the list of questions highlighted in the questionnaire. The data collection mechanism was chosen to attempt to answer the following questions:

1. In talking to people about this State Assembly election, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were not registered, or they were sick, or they were not interested in voting this time or they just didn’t have the time. What about you - did you vote, or did you not vote in this election?
2. (If Voted) While deciding who to vote for, did you go by someone’s advice?
3. People have different considerations when they go out to vote. What was the most important consideration for you when you voted in the State Assembly election - party or candidate?
4. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the performance of the BJP-led government at the state over the last five years?
5. Do you think your vote has effect on how things are run in this country, or do you think your vote makes no difference?
6. Do you think that the state government is doing enough for the elderly persons?
7. As compared to five years ago, how financially sound is the economic condition of your household today?
8. How regularly do you watch Television?
9. How regularly do you read Newspapers?
10. How regularly do you listen to the radio?

RESULT/ OUTCOME:

The authors have underscored three prominent findings in the course of the research process. The survey is restricted to 100-200 respondents which in no wise accommodate the actual number of elderlies in the constituency. However, in the pursuit to scale higher grounds, the author highlights the findings for the sake of greater inclusiveness. Firstly, it is observed that proxy voting for the elderly was widely practiced. The elderly group of people represented less than one-fifth of the voters in the polling station. Some of the interviewees are sought out in their respective homes.

Secondly, the elderly in Saikot AC are not satisfied with the performance of the BJP led government in the state. Figure 1 indicated that the dissatisfaction with the ruling regime is more with the more senior citizens of the state. They reported that the economic conditions in the family have largely remained the same. Also, the old-age pension is reported to have been delayed for two months in a row.

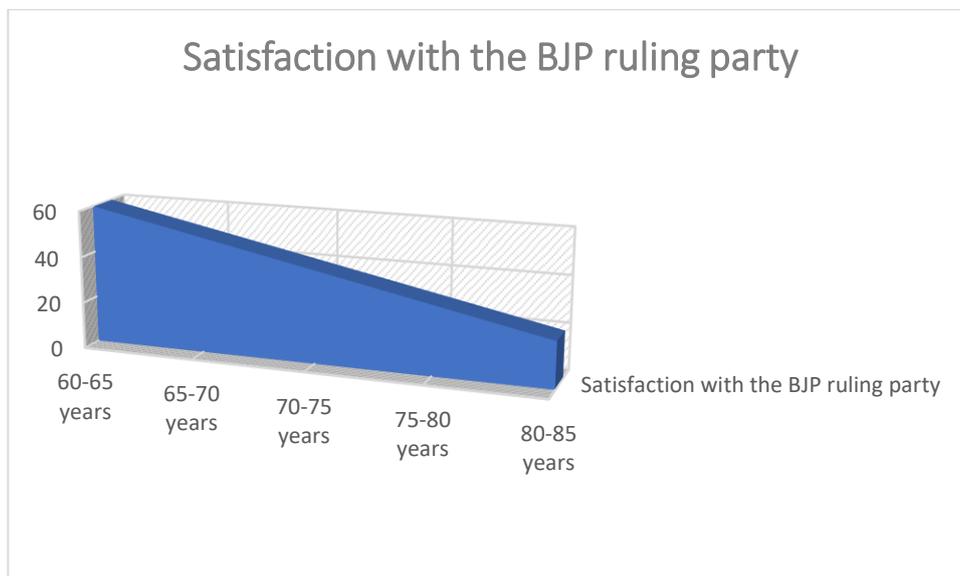


Figure 1: Satisfaction of the elderlies against the BJP ruling party.

Thirdly and lastly, Figure 2 shows that the elderly are in favour of the ‘candidate’ than the ‘party’. Unsurprisingly, more than 70 out of 100 interviewees have claimed to have voted in candidate-line than party-line. Additionally, many of the elderly are unaware of the ideology held by a party.

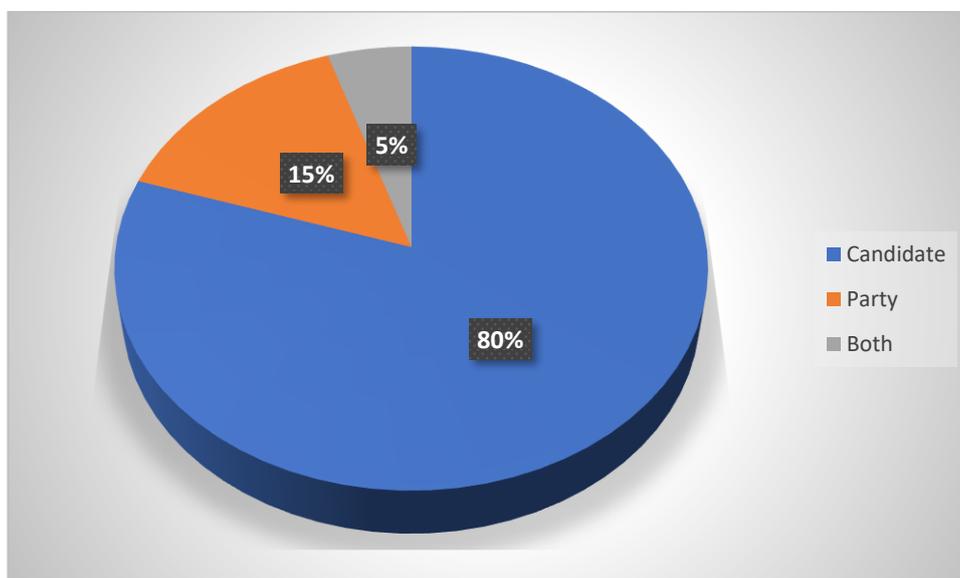


Figure 2: Whether voters vote for Candidates, Parties or both.

DISCUSSION AND DATA ANALYSIS:

The rationale behind the survey is that some respondents must have voted for at least six (6) or seven (7) times or even nine (9) times in their lifetime. Therefore, the experience garnered thus far would prove to be meaningful. Some of the respondents are as old as 80 years. To obtain a reliable information, the interviewees are chosen from an age ranging between 60- 80 years. Proxy voting is practiced not only for the elderly but also for other age group as well. In the ‘Eimi Times’ a young voter named Dennis complained that his vote is casted by a proxy. But the officials allegedly turned a blind eye on this pressing issue. However, today the voter can recast his vote under the provision of ‘Tender Ballot’. Coming back to proxy voting for the elderly, their vote is casted by a proxy allegedly because of health issues. Otherwise, their votes are registered under the electoral roll in India, and they are equally capable of voting.

The discontentment of the elderly towards the BJP led government is another issue. The irregularity in the Old-age pension, family pension, payment of gratuity etc. constitutes the major reasons behind the discontentment. The pandemic is blamed for any untoward incidences occurring in fields of economics, politics, religion etc. However, the respondents in the survey argued that the ruling of BJP started before the advent of the pandemic i.e. 2017 Manipur Legislative Assembly Election. Hence, their discontentment's with the government still hold grounds. Only a handful of respondents are satisfied with the performance of the government. And they are often, ex government employees implying that they are financially better placed. This is a reminder of the definition of pseudo- democracy, which is a government off the people, buy the people and far the people. In the North-Eastern states in general and Manipur in particular, candidates are weighed heavier than party. This is so because the ideologies of the party find little or no relevance in these parts of India. In the Saikot AC for example, public affection had been conferred upon the Congress Party for more than a decade thus far. However, this mindset became inverted when the public increasingly bestow their blessings upon the BJP candidate who seems more capable and visionary than the incumbent representative.

From Walter Lippmann to Noam Chomsky, News media is deprecated as propagandistic, a sycophant and a puppet for the privileged group who manufactures the consent of the public. However, majority of the elderly are apparently unaffected, simply because they are inactive in social media. Their ideas or opinions are less distorted or less corrupted by modernity. Nevertheless, they are equally vulnerable to public opinions prevailing in the society. A caveat is therefore issued in the interpretation of these findings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Election is more than just selecting the representatives. It also ensures both Legitimacy and Political Accountability. The electoral arena likewise is not meant only for political competition but also an interaction between the public and the candidate. According to Census 2011, there are 24 Ageing states in India. Manipur is also considered an ageing state. The aged population in terms of intercensal growthrate is decreasing. But in absolute terms, the population is increasing. Therefore, the role of the aged group in determining electoral outcome is crucial. To protect the older persons, we must protect our already existing traditional social institutions like family and kinship; neighbourhood bonding; community bonding; and community participation. Against all the odds, if the state has thus far succeeded in conducting 12 elections in the 60 Assembly Constituencies, it is also expected of her to succeed in meeting the needs of the 60 and above individuals in the state.

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