

# For the vast majority, being able to cast a vote freely is an affirmation of their status as equal citizens of India

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/05/19/for-the-vast-majority-being-able-to-cast-a-vote-freely-is-an-affirmation-of-their-status-as-equal-citizens-of-the-country/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/05/19/for-the-vast-majority-being-able-to-cast-a-vote-freely-is-an-affirmation-of-their-status-as-equal-citizens-of-the-country/)

2016-5-19

As Assembly election results are announced across India, **Mukulika Banerjee** discusses the Indian enthusiasm for elections. She challenges notions that high turnouts are linked to intimidation or inducements, and writes that for many the secret ballot offers hope and reaffirms their identity as an equal citizen of India, worthy of respect.



This post forms part of a series of posts on the 2016 Legislative Assembly Elections. Click [here](#) to read more.

Indians clearly like to vote. Evidence from the latest Assembly elections shows that turnouts in Assam, West Bengal and Puducherry were around 80 per cent and not much lower for Tamil Nadu or Kerala. Indians seem also keener to vote than ever before. Statistics show a steady rise in the turnout figures over the last three decades in several parts of India. The gap between women and men voters has also steadily reduced and in some States female voters now outnumber males.

But what does this enthusiasm for voting actually signify? One popular theory proposes that poor people vote because they are intimidated into doing so. Intimidation occurs for sure, but why then do voters in places where there is no intimidation do so? Another theory is that people vote in return for inducements. But recent research across India has shown that those who spend the most do not always win elections and voters do not feel any obligation to vote for those handing out freebies. In fact, they often accept the goodies from all parties but vote for only one.

## Development, a vote-winner

So do people really vote because they are keen to express their support for a particular candidate or party? This is certainly true; using your vote to express your choice — as captured in the Hindi word for vote, *matdan* — indicates. Several factors determine voter choice and as a current three-year study by an Indo-European network of scholars from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, London School of Economics, King's College London and CERI-Sciences Po shows, more and more people vote for development interests rather than merely to support the party that projects their ethnic or caste identity.

Political parties, on their part, tend to get very excited when turnouts are high and hope that a surge in voter numbers will add to their tally. Again, research has shown that historically high percentages in voting do not provide any indication of results and dramatic upsets have been caused both by low turnouts and high ones.

Some institutional factors have, however, contributed to the rise in voter turnouts that we are seeing currently, namely the cleaning up of electoral rolls and the voter enrollment and awareness drives undertaken by the Election Commission. First-time voters are particularly targeted and deceased voters are being removed from lists. But what about the rest of the electorate? How do we explain the significant number of votes that are registered on the NOTA (None of the Above) button introduced only recently? In some seats, the votes for NOTA have been larger than the winning margin, thereby determining the result. Do people take the trouble to go and vote only to register their rejection of every candidate? What are they voting for? Why are people in tears when they are unable to vote? How do we explain a middle-aged pot-bellied policeman in Kolkata expressing blissful satisfaction at being able to vote and approvingly pointing out that he was asked for his Elector's Photo Identity Card despite his uniform? Why did he think this was a good thing? Even more astonishingly, he went on to describe the vote he cast as "beautiful".

The use of the word “beautiful” to describe a vote should give us pause for thought. Elections globally can be dry affairs dominated by numbers, percentages and tallies. In India, election campaigns are rambunctious events, full of sound and fury, as the world is turned upside down, candidates trade insults, untold sums of unaccounted money change hands, electoral brokers use every trick in the book to deliver the votes they have promised to the party that pays them. Yet despite this mad carnival that could cause cynicism and apathy and turn people off politics altogether, when polling day arrives millions dutifully show up with their identity cards and cast their vote, and some even describe it as a “beautiful” experience. How do we explain this?

In my book *Why India Votes?* I presented some explanations. Based on research conducted by a team of researchers across India, we show that to understand the significance of elections and high voter turnout rates, we need to pay attention not just to politicians but also to the voters themselves. The research revealed that the act of voting itself holds enormous significance for people because on election days the most important actors are not the politicians but the voters. While politicians seemingly dominate campaigns, people point out the irony of even the most arrogant heads being bowed to beg for votes and the most corrupt of them being unable to buy a victory — thereby conceding that it is ordinary people who hold power at least during elections. Many noted that it is also the only time they see the administration doing their work free from political interference, thanks to the Model Code of Conduct imposed on the political establishment. It is the world they crave.

People are of course clear-eyed that politicians are crooked and corrupt and try to buy their votes but they point out that as long as they have the secret ballot they can ultimately vote for whom they like. “The vote is our weapon,” as many put it. In response to sceptical looks from the researchers, they offer examples from the past in which those who spent the most were not victors and the many surprise upsets. So do they simply vote in the vain hope that things will get better? Hope is oxygen, they reply, for to not hope is a luxury few in India can afford. In a philosophical vein, we were reminded of the meaning of the word *dan* in *matdan*: to give without expectation is the real virtue, and so it is with the vote. So what kind of virtue is this that is not quantifiable and cannot be depicted on graphs and tables? The simple answer is that being able to vote gives people self-respect and dignity. For the vast majority of the impoverished and ostracised population of India, being able to cast a vote freely is an affirmation of their status as human above all and as equal citizens of India.

### **Where all are equal**

A polling station in India is the only public space of its kind where there is genuine social diversity, where women are unafraid, where VIPs cannot be ushered to the front of the queue and where people are forced to stand shoulder-to-shoulder regardless of caste, class, skin colour or the richness of their attire — and women have to queue behind their domestic servants and men wearing gold watches stand behind one without shoes on his feet. No sense of entitlement or privilege works. Given India’s pernicious and vicious inequality, this is a radical arena. The procedure inside the polling booth reinforces the dignity of the voter further where she is treated politely and efficiently by officials, has her name called out without mention of her father or husband, sees her name on an official record, proving she is an individual in her own right.

Each of these actions reaffirms the identity of ordinary people as equal citizens of India, each of whom counts and is worthy of respect — and this alone for many was a good reason to vote. In fulfilling their duty to vote, people noted they had claimed their most fundamental right as citizens. It should not surprise us therefore that people proudly display their inked fingers after voting, for it is a material manifestation of a bundle of emotions that entering the polling booth brings with it. As one Dalit man put it, “After voting I walked tall, as I felt I too had some value in society.”

So in India, elections are the most important constitutionally radical moment in public life. By exercising their franchise, voters are able to reacquaint themselves with the values that democracy promises — equality, dignity and civility — values that sadly only manifest themselves on election days. We need to preserve their integrity at all cost.

*This post forms part of a series of posts on the 2016 Legislative Assembly Elections. Click [here](#) to read more.*

A version of this article originally appeared in [The Hindu](#) on 11 May 2016.

Cover image credit: Sonali Campion

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the Author**

**Mukulika Banerjee** is Director of the South Asia Centre and Associate Professor of Anthropology at LSE.

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics

