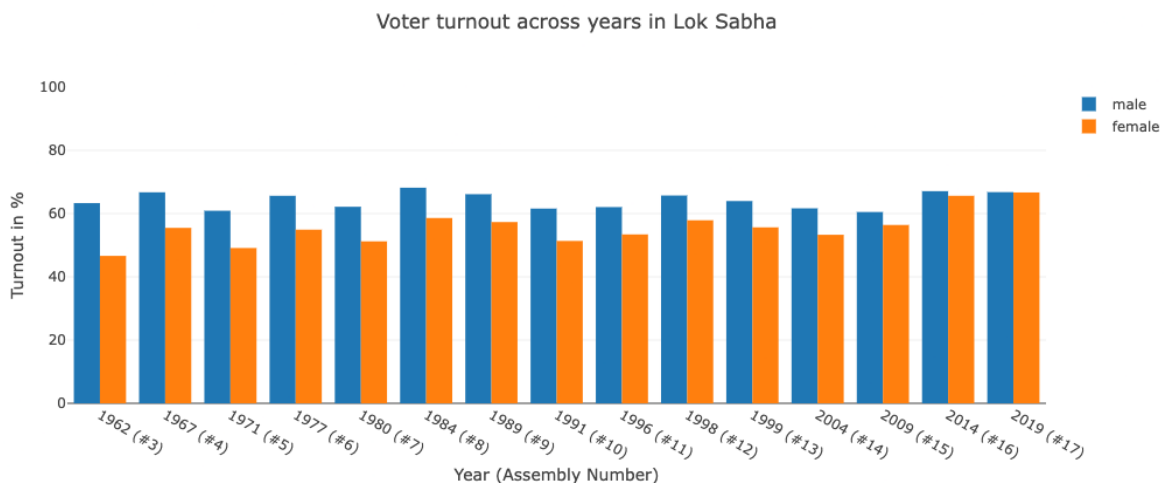




Understanding the Voting Decisions and Experiences of India's Young Women

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By 2019, the voting gap between men and women in Lok Sabha elections became negligible. In five state elections held in [March 2022](#), female turnout exceeded male turnout in four states. Be it in elections in Meghalaya or Nagaland (NorthEast), UP or Bihar (North), Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka (South), Maharashtra or Chattisgarh (Central), women turnout exceeding male turnout is now a durable national trend. As Milan Vaishnav noted, despite more male voters, female voter *turnout* has steadily outmatched male turnout in state and general elections in the past decade.



Voter turnout across years in Lok Sabha. Verniers et al. 2021. "TCPD Indian Elections Data v2.0", Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University.

From being registered as the wife of someone in colonial electoral rolls, India has come a long way in recognising them as equals. Ornit Shani documented how Indian women cast their votes despite huge gaps in registration, representation, and participation. Their presence reified the notion that power in independent India was truly derived from the people across caste, class, and gender. 70 years later, we attempt to gauge the revolution underway in how a specific section votes - the young, urbane, and literate woman.

Studying Young Urban Women

In the villages, women voters' turnout outmatches male turnout. Several policies by party leaders are aimed at this demographic - free cycles for girls in Bihar and Bengal, subsidised gas cylinders across India, and cash transfers to mothers of students in AP. Prohibition continues to be a potent promise, evident in Bihar (2015) and Andhra Pradesh (2019) state elections. But what of the urban voter? Ira Trivedi (*India in Love 2014*) and Shrayana Bhattacharya (*Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh 2021*) stress the centrality of young urban women to revolutions happening in sex,

love, marriage, civic action, and work cultures. What is equally important is a study of young urban women voters, especially when the 2019 elections returned the most women MPs ever to the Lok Sabha.

Between **May-June** 2021, we surveyed 928 women between 15-29 years across 30 states and union territories. The survey had sections on demographic details, factors affecting the voting process, perceptions of candidates and political parties, and what issues were important to their voting choices. The findings indicate young women face several challenges in voting, including a lack of access to accurate information on electoral processes, candidates, and parties. The findings also highlight the need for safety measures for a violence-free voting process, exploring postal voting mechanisms, and simplifying registration procedures. Overall, the study underscores the need to address the infrastructural, political, and social aspects that influence women's voting choices.

Infrastructural Aspects

We divide our findings into three themes - *infrastructural, political, and social*. In terms of infrastructure, we focused on state machinery (providing disability-friendly infrastructure, dynamic registration processes, ease of access, etc). Every eligible participant was found to have registered herself to vote. Many participants found the processes of transferring voter registration, and obtaining voter cards with the right information extremely difficult. This will grow to be a challenge as rural-to-urban migration among women seeking jobs continues to rise.

The survey found that the absence of a polling booth nearby is crucial, with 27% of participants considering it a demotivating factor. Additionally, the absence of postal voting facilities is a major obstacle for those who don't live in their hometowns. Political violence, voter intimidation, and post-poll repercussions were also significant concerns, with 31% of participants citing it as a demotivating factor. Incidents of booth capture and the possibility of violence at polling booths made many participants feel unsafe, discouraging them from voting. Exercising the right to vote and supporting a preferred party are factors that motivated more than 90% of the participants. Expressing anger against the current government is also a driver among 61% of the participants.

The voting process itself was found to be fairly easy, though nearly a fifth of the participants revealed their answers to be highly contextual, influenced by past experience. Some participants stated they wouldn't vote in the next election cycle due to being out of the country or losing faith in parliamentary democracy. One participant from Kashmir refused to vote as a dissent against India's control over Kashmir. The absence of a postal voting system and transferable jobs were cited as reasons that could prevent about a tenth of the participants from voting.

Political Aspects

We attempted to find out how women make decisions regarding who to vote for; specifically, the factors that go behind constructing their voting 'choices'. The survey gauged how young women perceive campaigns, parties and candidates and what factors influence their decisions. News coverage was the most dominant source of information (79%), followed by social media posts (66%) and political rallies (48%).

More than three-quarters of the participants did not read the election manifesto. Among those who did, only half found it easy to understand. The manifesto length, language, relevancy, and reach affected their voting choices.

The past work of the candidate was the most influential factor. While most of the participants based their decisions on election manifestos or the candidate's political party affiliation, quite a few were influenced by the candidate's personal or political track record. The candidate's gender was not a significant factor for most, but the majority agreed women candidates had a better understanding of women-related issues. However, some participants stated they would only vote for women candidates after considering their ideological affiliation and how much influence they exercise (as opposed to being a proxy). A candidate's past work remained the most influential factor for 91% of the participants, while criminal history was seen as a strong deterrent by 77%.

Social Aspects - What Issues Matter?

Participants were asked to rate the importance of issues that matter to them. Education, healthcare, and women's empowerment were rated the most important by 90% of the participants; foreign policy and national security were the least important. Participants stated they vote for candidates who focus on issues they care about, and many women prioritise ideological leanings over party/candidate. Other important factors in voting decisions included candidate qualifications, conduct, consideration for public opinion, and ability to accept criticism.

The findings suggest voting decisions are complex and depend on multiple interrelated factors. While some participants believe women candidates may better understand women's issues, it does not automatically lead to their vote. And although some prefer candidates from marginalised backgrounds, their decision rests on more significant factors - party affiliation, ideological stance, past political and personal track record, and issues championed. Overall, voting decisions are contingent on multiple considerations, including candidate qualifications and conduct, the party's anti-incumbency appeal, and the candidate's understanding of their constituency's needs.

Consciousness of Rights

Finally, why do young Indian women feel it necessary to vote? The majority (91.1%) said they would vote in the next election cycle to exercise their right and perform their duty to vote, as well as to elect a responsible and accountable government. Many women also see voting as a means of empowerment and a way to pay tribute to previous generations who fought tirelessly for the right to vote. Participants believed not voting would mean losing the only way to voice their opinion and criticise the government. Only a tiny fraction of the participants (less than 1%) reported having lost faith in the efficacy of voting or the system of parliamentary democracy.

For many participants, voting was considered their most important duty as a citizen of India, and they believed that it was necessary not only for themselves but for society as a whole. Participants reported that their political consciousness had increased, and even those who had not voted earlier were willing to start, with those who had not turned 18 eagerly waiting to participate in the process. They felt that not

voting robbed them of the right to criticise the government, stating – “If I don’t vote, I can’t complain”. It was seen as a way to change society for the better. Voting was also a way to express anger towards friends and family members who vote for parties that incite violence. Some participants felt that voting and voicing against incumbent governments’ policies and politics is a motivating factor. One participant wrote voting was so important to her that she even quit her job on not being provided a leave by her employer to come back home and vote.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that voting decisions depend on multiple interrelated factors. These include a candidate's past work, political and personal track record, qualifications and conduct, the party's anti-incumbency appeal, and the candidate's understanding of their constituency needs. For many, voting also served as a symbol of freedom, a tribute to those who fought for the right to vote. Young urbane women in India have become conscious of their right to vote; it was considered a sign of democratic freedom and a means to express dissent, a way to bring about positive change in society and to choose competent and honest leaders.

The findings of this study have important implications for the current political discourse in India. With growing awareness among young women of their rights, it is clear they will be more actively engaging in forthcoming elections. This could possibly lead to shifts in the political landscape as voters carefully evaluate their candidates based on track record, qualifications, and ideology instead of choosing the party with the most appeal. Moreover, young women's growing political consciousness is seen both as a symbol of their empowerment and as a way to ensure their voices are heard and taken into account. Finally, this survey further emphasises that voting is an intrinsic part of the democratic process and should be respected, regardless of the outcome. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that young women are provided with the necessary resources and support to engage in the electoral process in order to ensure fair and inclusive representation.

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