

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The participation level of women in the past two elections has shown a huge upsurge. There has been a substantial increase in the number of women participating in election campaigns. This research paper throws light on the fact that how to increase in women voters can eventually lead to an increase in women contesting elections and women getting a seat in the Parliament. As more women are taking an interest in the political affairs of the country there has been an upsurge in women voters and women contesting elections and eventually more women can be seen in the Parliament.

INTRODUCTION

Women's active participation in political spheres is an indicator of the efficacious growth of democracy in any country of the world. It shows the country has been successful in breaking the shackles of gender inequality and is moving toward a prosperous and healthy nation. Women must have a fair say and share in all the decision-making processes in a country. This paper explores the following questions. Do more women contesting elections lead to increased representation of women in Lok Sabha? Secondly, do more women voting in elections lead to an increase in the representation of women in Lok Sabha? An Indian woman has shown her excellence in almost every sphere of human activity and therefore politics is no exception to her but still, the under-representation of women in Parliament is a matter of concern.

VOTING RIGHTS FOR WOMEN IN INDIA

In a democratic country, its adult must get the power and opportunity to take part in elections either through contesting or through voting. India got its independence in 1947. In 1947 every citizen above 21 years of age got the right to vote irrespective of caste, color, gender, and creed. Before 1947 voting rights were present but they were only enjoyed by some privileged men and women. The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1905-1908) marked the beginning of Indian women's involvement in nationalist activities and brought up to the forefront the question of

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suffrage and voting rights. In 1917, Margaret Cousins founded the Women's Indian Association in Adyar, Madras, to create a vehicle for women to influence government policy. The organization focused on equal rights, educational opportunities, social reform, and women's suffrage. Annie Besant was the president and Herabai Tata was made general secretary. To secure an audience, the association sent an application to British Officials requesting a discussion of educational and social reforms for women. When it was rejected because the commission's research was limited to political topics, the association revised its application, focusing on the presentation of the political demands of women. The associations paved the way for women towards getting their share of votes in elections. Voting rights were provided to some women during 1920-29 based on property qualifications.¹ **Way back in 1921, Madras was the first legislature in British India to pass the women's suffrage resolution by a considerable majority.** As the vociferous battle for women's freedom and equality rages on in the country, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the journey, in many ways, began in Madras. This meant that for the first time, women were recognized as 'people' by the State, thereby given the right to vote on the same condition as men.² The Government of India Act of 1935 extended the vote to include around 6 million women, but even so, covered only 2.5% of the women in India. "In the 1937 elections, 10 women were elected from general constituencies, 41 from reserved constituencies, and five were nominated to provincial legislative councils". The struggle to further expand the franchise was tied to the drive to gain independence, though independence took priority over women's issues. In 1946, when the Constituent Assembly of India was elected, 15 seats went to women. They helped draft the new constitution and in April 1947 the Assembly agreed upon the principle of universal suffrage. The movement for women's suffrage in India took inspiration from Great Britain and the work of British women reformers that came to India. This movement brought up the fact that to run a country women must have a say in the functioning of the Government.³ When the first general elections took place in 1952 the first draft of rolls was published. The draft showed that 40 lakh women were not recorded in the list. They were simply listed as "daughter of..., wife of ". The Election Commission rejected these entries and ordered a revision of the same.

¹ *When madras' women won the vote* (2015) *The Hindu*. Available at:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/when-madras-women-won-the-vote/article6969753.ece>
(Accessed: 5 May 2023).

² (PDF) *women empowerment: Perspectives and views - researchgate*. Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319738851_Women_Empowerment_Perspectives_and_Views
(Accessed: 5 May 2023).

³ *Politics in India since independence*. Available at: <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/leps2ps.pdf> (Accessed: 5 May 2023).

This points out that even though voting rights were provided to women it is still a long way for them to be a part of the nation-building process.

WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN ELECTIONS

⁴The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to the 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: the decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. Women taking part in election campaigns, rallies, debates, and discussions have shown a great hike. Women's participation in formal elections reveals that women's turnout of votes has shown an increase. India ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of representation of women in Parliament. This represents that even after providing equal rights to women in all spheres of life it is a long way journey for them to come up and take active participation in parliamentary elections. It can be seen that the number of women candidates who contested the elections has increased and almost doubled from 284 in general elections held in 1999 to 566 in the general elections of 2004 (Table 1). But the number of women candidates fielded by national parties, has remained almost the same during this intervening period. The number of women contesting elections is quite meager. Thus, it will not be wrong to say that national parties have followed a discriminatory and gender-exclusionist policy in the allotment of seats to women in elections for Lok Sabha over the years and discouraged active participation in formal politics. The huge difference in the number of male versus female voters indicates the backward situation of the country. Political awareness among women lacks due to the factors like low literacy rates among women and no support from family and society even if women want to come up in elections. Women in India have failed to acquire the critical mass required to introduce gender perspectives and gender sensitivity in political decision-making processes at higher levels such as in legislative bodies which is quite unfortunate. This is the reason why we see only a handful of women ministers and MLAs. Women in India are showing their active participation in casting their ballots more frequently and in large numbers than ever before. Today we can see the increasing turnout of women in elections. This is a remarkable change in a patriarchal society like India.⁵ Some

⁴ *The global gender gap report 2012* (no date) *World Economic Forum*. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012/> (Accessed: 10 May 2023).

⁵ *South Asia research* (2023) *Sage Publications Inc*. Available at: <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal/south-asia-research> (Accessed: 6 May 2023).

theorists argue that electoral processes in India are fraught with male patriarchy and dominance, acting as impediments, and deliberately excluding women from sharing power as equals with men. Others dispute this argument, claiming that the increased participation of women in the electoral competition since the 1990s as voters and women's sharing of political power at grassroots levels reveal that electoral politics in India is no more gender-exclusive but rather inclusive. They feel that due to the strength and determination of women's movements in different parts of India, as well as government-regulated quotas, women's presence in the political arena is increasing, particularly in voting patterns, decision-making power, and women's access to positions in public office. After the 1990s there can be seen a hike in women voter turnouts and women contesting elections. This can be marked by the introduction of ⁶the New Economic Policy of 1991. As society became more liberal it started rejecting old conservative norms that were not healthy for a democratic country like India. In 1996 total of 599 women contested elections which was the greatest number of women candidates till that time. (Table 1) According to the research done by Chattopadhyay and Duffle, the cost of contesting elections is high for women in comparison to men. secondly, the final policy outcome that is taken forward by winning candidates is the mixture of a preferred policy and a policy option preferred by a local elite which is different from the policies wanted by the candidates. This suggests that even if a meager number of women can get success in elections it is not enough for their holistic development. Thus, there should be a considerable number of women participating in the elections so that they can change the scenario for themselves. Women are no longer confined to 4 walls now they are freely coming out and showing their remarkable presence in political spheres. Women's participation in elections is low pertaining to their social conditioning, marriage, household and employment, etc. They are breaking the shackles of societal norms that are holding them back. This can be seen in the increase in women voters and contestants with every election. The turnout gap which is narrowing from time to time was the lowest in the 2014 general elections when 65.5% of women turned out to vote. This gap further narrowed in the 2019 elections when women's turnout was 68% (Table 1). Overall, these trends show that women are actively participating in elections and contesting elections more enthusiastically. In the 2019 elections, 716 women contested the elections which is the highest number of women contestants to date. Out of 716 women 78 were able to get success in the elections. Even though this is the highest number of women in Parliament

⁶ 14, H.S. (2019) *New Economic Policy of 1991: Objectives, features and impacts*, Jagranjosh.com. Available at: <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/new-economic-policy-of-1991-objectives-features-and-impacts-1448348633-1> (Accessed: 10 May 2023).

than ever before still it is less than half of the males in Parliament. 2019 elections enlighten the fact that as society is growing more tolerant and open towards women's rights there can be a huge rise in women voting turnouts from 46.6% in the 1962 elections to 68% in the 2019 elections which is a huge gap. This huge gap in voting turnouts along with a high number of women candidates participating in elections and winning a seat in Parliament is evidence of women's showing more and more interest in electoral processes and decision-making. If the present rate of increase in women voters turnout keeps on increasing then the day is not far when females will outnumber males in Parliament.

Turnout of Women Voters in Elections			
Election Year	Women's Voter Turnout (%)	NO. of Women Candidates	No. of Women in Lok Sabha
1962	46.6	66	34
1967	55.5	67	31
1971	49.1	86	22
1977	54.9	70	19
1980	51.2	143	28
1984	59.2	171	44
1989	57.3	198	28
1991	51.4	330	36
1996	53.4	599	40
1998	58.0	274	44
1999	55.7	284	48

2004	53.3	355	45
2009	55.8	556	59
2014	65.5	668	66
2019	68	716	78

Source: Election Commission of India, New Delhi

Interpretation of Table: This Table represents % of women's voter turnout from the 1962 elections to the 2019 elections. This shows that women's voter turnout which was 46.6% in the 1962 elections has shown a huge gap in the last elections that occurred in 2019. Women's voting turnout was 68% in that year which is the highest % of women's turnout. In the 1962 elections, 66 women candidates contested the elections out of which only 34 were able to secure their seats in the Lok Sabha. In the 1967 elections, there was a slight rise in women contesting elections but there was a drop in the number of women winning the elections. This drop in women winning the elections continued till the 1984 elections. That year women contesting elections was 171 and women who were able to secure their seat in Lok Sabha were 44. The drop in women winning elections continued for the next two elections even though the women contesting elections showed a considerable rise. From the 1996 elections to the 2019 elections, there was a rise in women contesting elections as well as women winning the elections. This represents that the more women contesting elections more there will be chances that they can secure their seats in Parliament. Moreover, the rise in women winning elections is a result of more women participating in elections through their active voting. After the 1971 elections, the % of women voting turnout never go below 50%. In the past two elections 2014 and 2019, the % of women voter turnout was above 65% which is a considerable hike in the total % of women voters. 2019 elections broke all the records when women voting turnout, the number of women candidates participating in elections, and women winning the seat was highest ever.

WOMEN IN LEGISLATURE

Despite the constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality for the genders still electoral participation in terms of legislation and decision-making bodies is very low in comparison to men. The political history of India after independence shows shreds of evidence of women holding seats in Parliament. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur became the 1st woman to be in Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru cabinet. She served for a long duration of 10 years. ⁷Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi was the 3rd Prime Minister of India and also the first and to date only female President of India. She served as Prime Minister for a very long time. She was a very influential lady and during her period as a Prime Minister, she had contributed a lot to the development of the economy. When she became Prime Minister country had been lacking in funds because of an ongoing war with China and Pakistan. China War of 1962, the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965, and a huge drought in 1966. This created inflation in the economy. Thus, she devalued the Indian Rupee for improving the trade deficit in 1967. During the 1962 elections 66 women candidates contested for the seat in the Parliament out of which 34 were able to secure their position in Parliament. The trend of women contesting elections since 1962 was showing an upward growth but in 1977 it showed a downward trend. In the 1977 elections, Indira Gandhi faced a defeat in Rai Bareilly as a consequence of her actions during the emergency. In 1995 the question of affirmative action for women was raised demanding reservations in Parliament. All the parties agreed on the matter but soon dissensions surfaced. When ⁸ Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, was introduced on 9th March, 2010 the parties raised their objections to the bill. There were two main objections to the bill first was regarding the overlapping of quotas for women in general and those who are of lower castes. Second was the issue of elitism. The proposed bill is yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha although it was passed in the Rajya Sabha. The factors responsible for such a level of participation could be socio-historic forces inherited from the nationalist movements, prevailing social structure, and policies. The lack of willingness of the party to give tickets to female contestants because even if they participate in elections there is very less chance of them getting a seat. The participation rate among women has shown a good hike as in the year 1996 elections 599 women contested the election but still only 40 were able to secure their seat in Parliament. This

⁷ *Politics in India since independence*. Available at: <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/leps2ps.pdf> (Accessed: 5 May 2023).

⁸ *Women's reservation bill [the Constitution (108th amendment) bill, 2008]* (2023) PRS Legislative Research. Available at: <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/womens-reservation-bill-the-constitution-108th-amendment-bill-2008-45> (Accessed: 10 May 2023).

represents that even when women are coming up to participate in elections, they are not getting considerable support from the public. Smt. Sushma Swaraj was the Minister of External Affairs during the period of the first Narendra Modi government. She was the second to hold the Office after Indira Gandhi. ⁹Swaraj was called India's "best-loved politician" by the US daily Wall Street Journal. It is a matter of great pride that a woman in Indian Legislation is among the most powerful women in the world. In the 2019 elections, women's voter turnout was more than men's voter turnout. 78 seats were successfully attained by the women in Lok Sabha.¹⁰ This is the highest number of women M. Ps ever had in the political history of India. Presently there are 11 women ministers in Modi's cabinet which is the highest number in the last 17 years. This is a great move by Modi's government for empowering women. ¹¹According to the Forbes List of 2021, Nirmala Sitharaman was one of the 100 most powerful women in the world. This is a matter of great pride for India that a woman in Indian Legislation is among the 100 most powerful women in the world.

CONCLUSION

Increase in the number of women voters has a positive correlation with the number of women contesting elections and the number of women winning the elections i.e. as the number of women voters increases, women contesting elections and women getting success in elections also rises. In the past two elections of 2014 and 2019, a huge jump in women voter turnout directly affected the women standing for elections and women getting elected to the Parliament. It will not be wrong to say if there will be more women in Parliament, they will be able to raise their voice against the different problems they face and laws will be made accordingly to tackle those problems. If the women's reservation bill ever came into practice it can change the whole structure of politics in India. This step can prove to be the best step initiated by the government to empower women.

⁹ *Wall Street Journal* (2018) *Wikipedia*. Available at: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wall_Street_Journal (Accessed: 7 May 2023).

¹⁰ TIMESOFINDIA.COM / Jul 14, 2021 (no date) *Highest in the last 17 years: 11 women ministers in Modi's new Cabinet: India news - times of India, The Times of India*. Available at: https://m.timesofindia.com/india/highest-in-the-last-17-years-11-women-ministers-in-modis-new-cabinet/amp_articleshow/84407588.cms (Accessed: 7 May 2023).

¹¹ ["Moirra Forbes And Maggie Mcgrath With Nicolette Jones And Erika Burho"] (no date) *The world's 100 most powerful women 2022, Forbes*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/power-women/> (Accessed: 7 May 2023).