

DETERMINANTS OF VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN MIZORAM

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Abstract

Voting is a means of aggregating individual preferences into collective decision in an election, the action of formally indicating one's choice of candidate or political party at an election. Voting behavior refers to the action of casting a vote in favor of some party or candidate, and is to be distinguished voter turnout at elections. Assessment of voting patterns consistently focuses on determinants of electoral behaviour, or factors influencing electoral behaviour: why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they make. This paper examines various factor that influence voting behaviour in Mizoram-political, economic, religion, socio-economic, personality, etc. While various factors are at work, the paper concludes that political factor is the single most important determinant of voting behaviour in Mizoram.

Keywords: Voting, Voting Behaviour, Election, Delhi Factor, Insurgency.

Introduction

Voting is an essential element of modern democracies such as India. Voting lies at the heart of democratic process and are an expression of popular will. In deed there can be no democracy without the right to vote granted to citizens. All modern democracies including India have now given the right to vote to all its citizens. Voting means the process either by which citizens choose candidates for public office or the formal recording of

opinion of a group on any subject. In either sense, it is a means of transforming numerous individual opinions into a coherent and collective basis for decision (UK Essays, 2015).

In the case of India, where devices of direct democracy such as plebiscite, recall, etc are not available to the public, voting refers to the formal political process of electing representatives to a legislative body. Voting thus, is a means

of aggregating individual preferences into collective decision in an election, the action of formally indicating one's choice of candidate or political party at an election. With the introduction of NOTA (None Of the Above) option in Indian elections, voting now also means the action of formally indicating disapproval of candidates in elections.

Voting behavior refers to the action of casting a vote in favor of some party or candidate, and is to be distinguished from the decision to vote (or voter turnout at elections). Voting decisions are normally taken by a person or group of persons over a long period of time. Therefore, analysis of voting behaviour is concerned with that part of the person's total behavior which is involved in the formation and execution of a voting decision on Election Day (M Visser, 1998).

Determinants of voting behaviour or factors influencing voters in elections

Assessment of voting patterns consistently focuses on determinants of electoral behaviour, or factors influencing electoral behaviour: why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they make. A brief analysis of some of the main determinants of voting behaviour in Mizoram (LH Chhuanawma, et al, 2015) is attempted here.

Political: A large number of people vote for candidates on account of partisan

attachment to his/her party. Other things being equal, this explains why candidates from smaller and minor parties tend to lose in elections; and conversely, candidates from bigger and major parties tend to win in elections. Bigger parties have larger electoral base and smaller parties naturally have smaller electoral base. However, partisan attachment becomes less significant at local level elections such as elections to the Local Council and Village Council. In local elections, kinship plays a significant role in determining voting behaviour.

What may be described as 'Delhi factor' or 'Delhi Dependency Syndrome' is another very important political determinant. To my mind, this is the single most important factor in determining voting behaviour in Mizoram. In all Assembly elections in Mizoram held so far, a party or an alliance of parties (at the state) that is connected either directly or indirectly with the ruling party or parties at the Centre always invariably won. The only exception was 1987 state Assembly elections in which the MNF (Mizo National Front) won despite the party having no political patronage from the Centre. The euphoria of the 1986 Mizo Peace Accord has effectively swung the election in the MNF's favour, thus overriding even the Delhi factor in 1987.

Mizoram being completely dependent on Central financial

assistance, the electorates perhaps make a conscious choice in voting to power parties towards whom the ruling dispensation in Delhi are perceived to be favourably disposed. The so-called '10-years rule' that is often used to explain the change of guards after every 10 years in Mizoram is better explained by this 'Delhi factor' (A popular belief in Mizoram supposes a cyclic end of the rule of a party in the state at every 10 years period and its return to power after another 10 years period. This is an

irrational numerological attempt to explain a political phenomenon).

A parallel dependency syndrome of this kind could be seen in elections to the three District Councils (Lai, Mara and Chakma) and rural Village Councils wherein voters clearly tend to vote in favour of the ruling party candidates. The voters' tendency to vote for the Aizawl partner of a ruling party in Delhi is akin to the rich-poor relationship analogy. The poor beneficiary, knowing the desire of the rich benefactor, gets ready to welcome the latter.

Table-1: Showing impact of 'Delhi factor' on Assembly Elections and formation of Governments in Mizoram

<u>LS Tenure Ruling party/parties</u>			<u>MZ A/S Tenure Ruling party/parties</u>		
<u>(Central Gov't, Delhi)</u>			<u>(Union Territory of Mizoram)</u>		
5 th	1971-77	INC	1 st	1972-78	MU/INC *
6 th	1977-80	JP	2 nd	1978-79	PC
—	—	—	3 rd	1979-84	MPC
7 th	1980-85	INC	4 th	1984-87	INC
<u>(Central Gov't, Delhi)</u>			<u>(State of Mizoram)</u>		
—	—	—	1 st	1987-1989	MNF
8 th	1985-1/12/89	INC	2 nd	1989-93	INC + (Election 1/1/89)
9 th	1989-90	NF/CS	—	—	—
10 th	1991-96	INC	3 rd	1993-98	INC+
11 th	1996-98	UF	—	—	—

12 th	19/3/98-17/4/99	BJP+	4 th	1998-2003	MNF+ (Election 25/11/98)
13 th	1999-2004	NDA	5 th	2003-2008	MNF
14 th	2004-2009	UPA-I	6 th	2008-2013	INC
15 th	2009-2014	UPA-II	7 th	2013-?	INC
16 th	2014-?	NDA	8 th	2018-?	??

Note:

LS = Lok Sabha	MZ A/S = Mizoram Assembly
INC = Indian National Congress	MU = Mizo Union
JP = Janata Party	PC = People's Conference
MPC = Mizoram People's Conference	MNF = Mizo National Front
NF = National Front	CS = Chandra Sekar
UF = United Front	NDA = National Democratic Alliance
UPA = United Progressive Alliance	INC+ = INC+MNF (D) in 1989
INC+ = INC+MJD in 1993	MNF+ = MNF+MPC in 1998

* *MU came to power in 1972; post-merger Congress was installed in 1974-1978*

Source from-LH Chhuanawma, 2006, p.149.

Economic: It has become a generally accepted principle that improvement or worsening of economic conditions can respectively increase or decrease the probability of voting for the party perceived to be responsible for the change. Besides, it is easy to induce poor voters to vote for candidates who offered money or sops. One of the main reasons why the Congress has done so well in 2008 and 2013 Assembly elections was the Congress government's flagship economic programme, the NLUP (New

Land Use Policy). Before and during 2008 and 2013 Assembly elections, each entitled household was promised Rs. One lakh under the NLUP.

It is widely accepted that it is almost impossible for poor candidates or candidates with very limited resources to win elections. Running political campaigns, use of the media, visibility of candidates, etc require lots of money. Candidates with very limited resources cannot mobilize required financial and logistic support nor can they offer sops

to the poor. Presently, a candidate in Assembly election and Lok Sabha election from Mizoram is allowed to spend up to a maximum of Rs. 20 and Rs. 54 respectively. While the expenditure ceiling for Lok Sabah election is reasonable, the one for Assembly election is quite unreasonable. MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) candidates, especially in rural areas, normally spend much more than the upper limit set by the Election Commission of India.¹

Religion: Being a Christian-dominated state, religion plays an extremely vital role in influencing voters in the state. The fact that the diktats of Mizoram People Forum(MPF), an election watchdog that comprises of various religious denominations and NGOs, are always obeyed by political parties in the state is a testimony to the importance of the church or religion. Failure to comply with 'election guidelines' of the MPF by a party or its candidate would definitely reduce the chance of winning for the party. While giving tickets to candidates, parties always take into consideration a candidate's religious background, his denomination, his level of involvement in the church, etc. A 'good' religious report card (active or at least normal involvement in his church) is widely considered to have enhanced a candidate's chance of winning an election.

Social and cultural: Ethnicity, clan and family ties also determine voting behaviour. These factors are still quite significant particularly in the three Autonomous District Council areas, Hmar and Paite-dominated areas of north and north-east Mizoram, and rural Mizoram in general.

Regionalism: Regionalism is another determinant of voting behaviour in Mizoram. On the whole, the Mize National Front always harps on 'Mizo nationalism' to influence voters to its advantage. The MNF's pet electoral slogan against its main rival the Congress party is that the latter is a 'Vai party', that is, a party that promotes the interests of the non-Mizos. The MNF often accuses the Congress leaders of 'dancing to the drum beats of their *Vai* masters in Delhi'. On the whole, regionalism is a strong factor in elections in southern Mizoram.

Personality: Personality of candidates and of leaders of parties do play their own role. Accessibility, popularity, leadership quality, educational qualification, socio-religious backgrounds, etc of a candidate or party leaders all impact decision-makings of electorates in varying degrees.

nsurgency: From 1966 when it went underground to the signing of the Mizo Accord (1986), the MNF always played

a decisive role in electoral politics of Mizoram. During this twenty years' period, a party (parties) backed by the underground MNF almost always won Assembly elections. And, today there are still insurgent groups like *Hmar People's Convention* (D) and *Zomi Reunification Organization* that often directly try to influence people to vote for candidates of the formers' choice. In certain parts of north and north-east Mizoram, especially in the HPC 'Demand Areas' insurgency is indeed a strong determinant of voting behaviour in both Assembly and Village Council elections till this very day.²

Public Opinion and Mass Media: Public opinion and mass media has, of late, become an important determinant of voting behaviour in Mizoram. The media tends to play a greater role in determining voting behaviour in urban areas than in rural areas. This is because there is a greater degree of media penetration in the former. Other factors such as party leadership, manifesto, campaign, tract records of governance, incumbency, etc also impact voting behaviour.

To conclude, voting behaviour is a complex and a multi-faceted issue. No single factor could be the sole determinant of why and how a person votes, and as such diverse factors must be taken into account. Above all, the

determinants differ from one person to another, from one region to another, and from one era to another.

End notes

1. Poll expenditure ceiling raised in 2014:

For bigger states: The government amended Rule 90 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, and increased the ceiling for Lok Sabha poll to Rs.70 lakh per candidate from the existing Rs.40 lakh, and for the Assembly poll to Rs.28 lakh from Rs.16 lakh. However, this is applicable only in the bigger States.

For smaller states: In Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Sikkim, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, Lakshdweep and Puducherry, the ceiling for LS poll is Rs.54 lakh. For Assembly elections, the new ceiling in Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and Puducherry is Rs.20 lakhs.

2. In 2003 Assembly elections, it was widely believed that the Hmar People's Convention (D) was involved in the Suangpuilawn (now Chalfilh) Assembly Constituency (in favour of H Lalsangzuala aka Sangnoa, an Independent candidate) while the Zomi

Re-unification Organization was believed to be involved in Khawbung, Champhai and Ngopa A/Cs (in favour of the MNF candidates). The underground outfit, the ZRO was involved in terrorizing voters in Champhai and surrounding areas to vote for Zoramthanga in 2003 Assembly election.

There was even a faked abduction in the Suangpuilawn A/C that involved three MLA candidates belonging to the INC, MNF and MPC in 2003.

Chief Minister Zoramthanga's second tenure (2003-2008) was a very gloomy period in the state's post-1986 history. Many people feared that the Mizo society was heading for chaos and anarchy. The unprecedented use of money and muscle power during 2003 Assembly elections in fact has directly led to the formation of the Mizoram People's Forum in June 2006, a forum dedicated: "To work for good governance and to clean up the electoral system of the state of Mizoram".

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