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Political orientation of teachers: Issues and concerns

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Abstract

This study focuses on the dynamics of teachers' political orientation and its impact on the educational context. It also focuses on the interconnections between democracy, political orientation, and political participation. This study highlights how teachers' beliefs and teaching practices shape students' civic and political beliefs. Teachers act as mediators in fostering democratic values through their teaching style, curriculum content, and communication. They influence and build critical thinking and equality qualities among students and make them responsible citizens. This paper discusses factors such as socioeconomic background, geographical location, professional practices, and mass media that play an important role in shaping teachers' political perspectives. This study aims to bridge the gap between political orientation and participation to foster a healthier democratic culture.

Keywords: Democracy, political orientation, political participation, education, teachers

1.1 Introduction

Democracy is a system of governance where citizens hold the authority to decide on electing representatives. Democracy emphasises that legitimacy is derived from the collective decision of its citizens. It also plays an important role in promoting political stability. Democracy is a form of government in which all citizens have equal rights to participate in decision-making, and every voice is to be heard. Ambedkar defines "democracy as a mode of rule that ensures fair access to social resources." Democracy originated in Athens and empowered ordinary citizens in governance. Citizens who represent themselves make their choice by consenting or casting their vote regardless of wealth or class. In Athens, it is a collective decision-making method. Citizens represent themselves in democracy, which emphasises both a system of governance and normative principles. It can also be considered a political regime that works with the consent of citizens and is characterised by a system of authority and domination by consent (Kathleen, 1984) ^[9]. It is a political system of people's sovereignty that exercises power through elected representatives. It encircles a form of society, governing authority, and method, including a system of values that emphasises freedom and equality (Schwartzman, 1998) ^[13]. A report on citizenship and democracy (Athiyatul Mufidah & Abdullah Syarofi, 2024) ^[3] has demonstrated that we cannot draw a sharp line between civic activities and political engagement because both are interdependent. Civic engagement includes any activities, either individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of politics. A study by Dalton (2008) ^[4] explains that changes in the mode of political activity reflect changes in the style of political action and the level of political participation. In recent decades, we have seen a continuous expansion of modes of participation in India as well as globally that emphasise the relevance of political participation to democracy. Participation is either an elixir of life or a determinant of healthy democracy. Political participation can be loosely defined as citizens' activities that affect politics. Citizens' activities can take many forms: voting, demonstrating, boycotting, signing petitions, volunteering in political activities, taking part in political rallies, participating in protests, including suicide protests, and making social media posts. Political participation is not defined as an activity or action like watching television, visiting websites, or claiming to be interested in politics; rather, it is understood as an action taken by citizens and should be voluntary and not enforced by law. Political participation in a broad sense deals with the government, politics, or the state. (Norris P, 2000) ^[11] claims that political activities impact civil society, which may alter systematic patterns of social behaviour. Zukin *et al.* (2006) ^[17] believe that political participation and civic engagement should focus on problem-solving

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and helping others without being linked to individuals' selfish and biased self-interest.

1.2 Relationship between democracy, political orientation, and political participation

In democratic societies, political activism is more dependent on individual participation, which emphasises that personal political orientation significantly influences political participation. This explains that democracy, political orientation, and political participation are interrelated concepts that shape governance and citizen engagement. According to Maboudi & Nadi (2022) ^[10], democracy is characterised by citizens' engagement in public life, manifested through voting, activism, or protests. Political participation is linked to citizenship in that individuals seek to influence their political community. Political orientation encompasses individuals' political awareness and level of activities (Al-Khaza'leh & Lahiani, 2021) ^[11]. Political orientation does not promote constructive participation because orientation and participation are influenced by different factors. Political orientation refers to an individual's views, attitudes, beliefs, and choices regarding political issues, ideologies, and party preferences. On the other hand, political participation influences political output. Some factors of political orientation leading to political participation, like lack of financial support and time, may affect people and may have anticipation. A low level of education hinders an individual from participating; low political efficacy, a lack of distrust in political institutions, and geographical locations like rural populations may find it difficult to access political activities compared to the urban areas. Other than this, some communities or groups, like women and minorities, may get restrictions to actively participating and engaging in political activity. Differences in priorities, like family, profession, and commitments, may overrule political engagement and impact an individual's decision to participate in politics. Failure of the political leader to fulfil their previous expectations and not having trust in political parties may also lead to apathy. Fear of expressing their political preferences to the public is one of the barriers, which does not impact the political orientation to promote political participation. By bringing proper changes in policies and social initiatives, we can bridge the gap between political orientation and active political participation.

1.3 Linkage between democracy and education

In a broader view, democracy is a set of political processes that foster liberty and equality. Education more or less promotes similar values. Democracy in schools is about inculcating discipline and lawful behaviour in students. Schools are formal institutions that educate children intellectually, emotionally, socially, and politically to cope with the challenges. The school, like any other formal institution, also follows the curriculum and contents to develop qualities like cooperation, leadership, civic values, and participatory and democratic attitudes among students. The curriculum has been a very important tool of instruction that has been improved into an active, autonomous, and reflective learning tool based on child-centred education. Similarly, teachers receive ample training to learn different tactics related to student-centric teaching methods, giving individual attention, and identifying the availability of facilities provided by the government to the weaker sections of society. In the context of education, children and youth

play the role of the people who enjoy the same rights and liberties as the citizens in terms of participation in decision-making in schools and institutions. In school, children join different committees and clubs through which they learn group decision-making and responsibilities. These committees are broadly linked to community groups and projects. Participating in Gram Sabha makes students understand their village settings. School parliament is the best example to teach children about democracy and its values, like equality, freedom, equal opportunities, tolerance, etc., and helps to develop democratic leadership.

1.4 Role of the teacher's political orientation

In the educational context, the political orientation of teachers is important for several reasons. It can significantly influence various aspects of education. Teaching subjects most of the time incorporate the topics about democratic principles and governmental structures. For students to understand the broader social implications, teachers are role models, and their political orientations may help shape students' attitudes and values. Teachers play a significant role, as their attitudes, perspectives, critical thinking skills, beliefs, and views may impact young minds. Teachers' stands may set trends among students, which may make them act and adopt similar views in the future. Teachers are increasingly considered facilitators who are instrumental in fostering civic awareness, responsible behaviour, treating everyone equally, and providing equal opportunities for their students. Teachers are also considered community leaders; their political orientation guides their involvement in local community programs. Their involvement as members of the different unions and their contribution to the policymaking process can improve the education system. Kara (2016) ^[8] explains that educators help students engage in a collaborative decision-making process, which is one of the essential qualities of participatory democracy. Political orientation may cause teachers to face discrimination by restricting personal rights and limiting extracurricular activities, which may result in feeling alienated and demotivated (Albalá *et al.*, 2019) ^[2]. Advocates that open discussions on controversial discussions and teachers stand for that issue may enhance critical thinking among students, discuss language choice, influence the perception of the audience, and promote classroom activities. The usage of grammar and language empowers students with informed choices. Teachers' political orientation influences their choice of teaching method, which paves the way to disclose their political beliefs in handling controversial topics and balancing personal and professional commitments to create an inclusive classroom environment (Kara, 2018) ^[12]. School is a formal institution providing education wherein teachers, to a large extent, impact the political orientation of students. Taking into consideration, if we discuss the different levels of education that are primary, secondary, and college levels, the political orientation of individuals varies significantly across these levels, thereby indicating that these differences may arise from the variation of political engagement and ideological development at each educational stage. Political awareness among primary children is minimal, as at this stage family and community influence is more compared to any other institution, whereas high school education is vital in shaping political preferences, as the high school age can be considered as the age wherein identity formation takes place on a larger scale.

The continuation of this quality among college students shows more political activities often shaped by the socioeconomic background and the political climate of the institutions. College students' exposure to the media can be regarded as a high-dynamic form of political information that encourages them to participate in political activities. In contrast, the education of students may limit their political engagement at the primary and high school levels, as it is the level of the developing stage of political orientation and may get less scope to expose their political orientation compared to the college level. At the college level, it is difficult to influence their views, values, and beliefs about politics. High school is said to be a crucial stage in the formation of political orientation since it lays the groundwork for the growth of civic engagement. Democratic values are fostered via involvement in extracurricular activities. According to Shelly (2011) [14], students who participate in school organisations are more likely to become politically active adults. High schools that provide an opportunity to discuss politics through co-curricular activities and develop volunteer opportunities contribute to a higher level of civic participation among high school students. Compared with primary and college education, high school education often has a greater impact on political orientation. Adolescence is a time of identity formation, including political and civic identities. High school students can begin learning abstract political concepts that are impossible at an early age. Peers, social media, and family highly influence adolescents in high school. The political orientation of teachers impacts students at different levels in different ways, mainly because of the differences in students, like differences in critical thinking, exposure to the political environment, and usage of social media. The primary level is too early to understand the political concepts and be involved in the decision-making process. For high school students, being younger and at an earlier stage of high cognitive development, ideological development, and identity formation are some of the qualities they often rely upon teachers for, as they are their initial facilitators who introduce political views and beliefs to their students. A teacher's exposure to or limitation in political and civic issues, critical evaluation, and multiple perspectives impact the level of political orientation among students. In contrast, in general, college students think independently and are exposed to diverse thinking. They may have already adopted some political views and beliefs. So further learning may only help to reinforce their existing beliefs and not develop any new values, ideologies, or views. Hence, it can be strongly argued that high school students are influenced by their teachers's views. Teachers' political orientation plays an important role in developing cognitive, critical, and political thinking (Vanaria, 1958) [15] among students. Teacher-student relationships have significant and lasting effects on both academic and social development. A balanced approach may help to foster openness, critical analysis, and supportive interactions that can significantly enhance student outcomes.

1.5 Factors influencing the political orientation of high school teachers

Schools are small politics (Elmore, 1987) [5]. Uneven power relations influence teachers' political orientation. Their role as political actors is shaped by their interconnections within the educational community. School is a living laboratory for

reform (Futrell, 1988) [6] as meaningful changes start at the root level with the interactions between teachers, parents, and children's involvement. It is the learning outcomes from the school level that are long-lasting. Teachers play an important role in achieving this. Some of the key factors that shape these orientations are as follows:

1.5.1 Dimension of the student-teacher relationship

School is the first public institution beyond the family where the child extends from childhood to adolescence. As part of the teaching and learning processes, formal instruction and teachings are imparted to the students in the classroom by the teacher. The student also plays an important role in the transmission of political orientation, but adhering to the contents of the curriculum, the teacher may undertake manifest political socialisation of the student. Apart from this, the teacher may also contribute towards the latent political socialisation of the student, as the teacher's authoritative structure which is democratic or authoritarian in form acts as a determinant factor. In a democratic pattern, the teacher allows and encourages students to participate actively and probe questions in the classroom. In contrast, in an authoritative structure, a teacher follows strict rules and does not permit students to participate in any kind of classroom activities, which tends to transmit the same orientation among students. The students may adopt any of the above structures to determine their political roles and interactions (Guru, 2015) [7].

1.5.2 Socioeconomic background

Most of the teacher's teaching process revolves around the student's learning process. In doing so, teachers' perceptions of the student's socioeconomic status also play an important role. Teachers teaching in schools where socio-economically disadvantaged students need may develop awareness about inequalities. Interactions with students of low socio-economic backgrounds help to develop a political orientation towards advocating for policies addressing social justice and economic redistribution, and it may influence teachers to support policies that benefit underprivileged communities. Teachers in schools with greater percentages of low socioeconomic status children frequently face resource shortages, which influences their opinions on government accountability and funding policies. Teachers working in schools with greater funding may give preference to laws that encourage localized control over or privatization of education.

1.5.3 Personal values

Human values have a large influence on an individual's political education. Political views impact their attitude toward and involvement in social concerns. These values foster openness, critical thinking, decision-making, universalism, freedom of thought, and adaptability. Such attributes influence their perspectives on education policies, classroom activities, content analysis, and curriculum design. Personal values usually guide teachers in making ethical decisions. Teachers who are open to adopting new learning methods may be more open to progressive educational reforms and fostering innovation and creativity. Teachers who value freedom of thought are likely to advocate multiple strands on controversial situations. Teachers with humanistic values may emphasize moral education, civic responsibility, global awareness, and holistic development.

1.5.4 Geographical location of the school

The geographical location of the school, whether it is in an urban or rural area, may impact their political orientation. Teachers in urban areas typically work in more progressive and diverse environments and have access to more possibilities, which may foster openness, equality of opportunity, and values among them.

1.5.5 Professional practices

Teachers' political orientation influences how they state their views on controversial issues. It explains how they present multiple strands to encourage independent thinking, or, in contrast, it may force them to limit themselves by expressing their views in their work fields. Political ideologies differ according to the teaching subject. For some subjects, like social science, and to some extent language, teachers may express their views openly compared to other subjects like mathematics and science and special subjects like drawing, music, craft, etc.

1.5.6 Usage of the mass media

Any communication system that works well is beneficial for citizens and democracy. Usage of mass media like newspapers and television in general and social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, X (formally Twitter), and WhatsApp may impact teachers' political orientation, whereas these mass media and social platforms are easily accessible and have user-friendly interfaces. Selection of platforms based on personal interests and use them more regularly to learn about politics and political news, which may influence teachers' political inclinations or aid in the revision or review of their political views. Media and information literacy in school is needed through which children can learn to smartly choose the platforms as well as learn to check reality about the information, which may cope with misinformation and disinformation, as both are threats to democracy in general. According to the present situation, the use of mass media and social media highly impacts the political orientation of teachers.

1.5.7 Controlling authority

Schools are classified into government, aided, and private institutions. This may impact their political orientation, whereas government teachers are bonded with state rules that do not go far beyond the government policies. All the teaching-learning activities are mostly constructed based on curriculum; in contrast, private school teachers often experience more autonomy in teaching approaches and foster diverse political views as they have greater flexibility in integrating diverse perspectives. Public or government schools may find diversity in nature to serve a broader demographic; on the other hand, private schools depend on their affiliation that is religious, or elite institutions might have a more homogeneous community aligning with specific political or ideological stances (Winrow, 2024) ^[16]. These are some of the factors that illustrate the complex interrelations between persons' professional, societal, and psychological influences that impact the political orientation of high school teachers.

1.6 Bridging the gap between political orientation and political participation

Educators have a vital role in moulding future generations' character. A particular political orientation can motivate

individuals to participate in the political process, yet it does not guarantee political participation. Filling the gap between political ideology and involvement in politics is crucial, particularly among educators who teach their students the same values. Key strategies to bridge the gap between political orientation and participation include the following:

- By giving greater involvement to teachers in shaping government policies on education and designing the curriculum.
- By ensuring freedom and flexibility to teachers in executing the curriculum.
- By providing a conducive and less interventionist atmosphere in the educational institutions.
- Encouraging active participation of students in classrooms and ensuring a two-way approach to teaching.

1.7 Conclusion

The political orientation of teachers is a multifaceted issue, and it is influenced by different factors like personal values, institutional policies, affiliations, psychological factors, socioeconomic factors, and the usage of mass media. This study examines the challenges faced by teachers in maintaining neutrality in the classroom because the balance between personal beliefs and professional responsibilities remains unsolved. Institutional policies like public school teachers often work within limited, rigid structures shaped by state and federal structures, which mostly suppress open political engagement. In contrast, private schools may provide more flexibility by aligning specific political ideologies and limiting their diversity of perspectives. Teachers' political orientations often reflect the socioeconomic and cultural context of their schools, which is influenced by factors such as the school's geographical location and students' socioeconomic conditions. The creation of educational policies that uphold teachers' autonomy and promote inclusive and knowledgeable political conversation in classrooms can be guided by these principles. Teachers' autonomy can be protected, and their balanced political discourse can be encouraged to promote an equitable and inclusive educational system.

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