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Electoral politics and voting behavior of the electors in Assam: A study of the legislative assembly and Lok Sabha elections since 2011 to 2024

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Abstract

Electoral politics refers to the process of election, factors involved in the election and the voting behavior of the electors. Elections are considered as the main pillars of modern democracy. Because, election gives opportunity to the people to participate in the government formation as well as to exercise the political power. India is regarded as the largest and stable democracy in the world. India is following the model of representative democracy where elections are the main basis of democracy. In India elections are held to form every government. Assam is the largest state in the North Eastern part of India. It has a strategic importance, as a gateway to India's international relation with South Asian countries. Thus, the electoral politics of Assam is politically significant in the politics of India. Since 2011, there has been change in the trends of electoral politics of Assam. The massive rising of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is noticed in the electoral politics of the State since 2014 Lok Sabha election. On the other hand the Indian National Congress (INC) which was ruling the state for 15 years consecutively loses the support base in the state after 2011 Assembly elections. At the same time the AGP is also confined as a supportive alliance partner with the BJP during this period. In this study an analysis will be made about the trends in the electoral politics of Assam during the period from 2011 to 2024 with the help of election results of the Assam Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. At the same time we will try to identify the potential determinants of the voting behavior of the electors of Assam during the stated period.

Keywords: Election, electoral politics, politics, voting behavior, political party, democracy etc.

Introduction

Election and electoral politics are the pillars of democracy. Democratic nations organize elections to form the government by the representatives of the people. India inherited the western model of democracy where government is formed by the representatives of the people. Thus elections are the main foundation of the democracy in India. India is termed as the largest democracy of the world. Because, since independence, every government is formed by the representatives directly chosen by the people. Today, democracy in India has been evolved very strongly despite its linguistic, cultural, religious, demographic even territorial diversities. Every high level constitutional position is filled up by the persons chosen by the people through elections. From the President of India to the functionaries of the grass root level Panchayati Raj Institutions, all are chosen by the people through elections. In India, both direct and indirect election method is adopted for different elections. For Lok Sabha, Legislative Assembly and local bodies like Panchayati Raj Institutions, Municipal Boards and other Autonomous Bodies the First-Past-the-Post system of election is adopted. Thus, the first-past-the-post system of election is very popular in India. In these method of election every voters played an important role in choosing their representatives. Accordingly, to understand the democracy in India in general the electoral politics of India in particular the study of voting behavior of the electors is crucial. In this paper, we will try to highlight the electoral politics of Assam and the voting behaviours of the electors of Assam with the help of Lok Sabha election results since 2014 and Assam Legislative Assembly election results since 2011.

Review of Literature

Study of electoral process and the voting behavior is a very popular subject among the

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academicians all across the disciplines. There are diverse disciplines and institutions which have carried out studies on the electoral process in India. Some of the published works on the electoral process in India are mentioned below.

Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, Joydeep Baruah, Ratna Bhuyan (2006) ^[1] in their book “Election Politics in Assam: Issues, Trends and People’s Mandate” analysed the elections in Assam during 1978 to 2001. The authors in this book have systematically analysed the issues like emergence of regional parties, gradual uprising of BJP, and role of insurgency issue in the electoral politics of Assam during the stated period. They have analysed how the emergence of insurgency groups like ULFA, BLT etc. have influenced the electoral politics of Assam. The authors have mentioned some other issues which have influenced the electoral politics in the state i.e. flood and influx of foreign nationals. The authors have attributed the failure of the AGP in the Assam Legislative Assembly election 2001 to the factors like corruption, unemployment, failure to pay the salary to the state government employees on time, decline of public sector undertakings like ASTC etc. In this book, the authors have discussed the impact of economic factors on the electoral politics of the state

Amandeep Kaur (2012) ^[4] in his article “Issues of Reform in Electoral Politics of India: An Analytical” pointed out that election system are the most integral part of the democratic system in any country of the world. According to him democracy can indeed function in its true spirit upon the faith that elections are held in a free and fair environment, not manipulated, that they are effective instrument of ascertaining popular will. He mentioned that India is regarded as the largest democracy in the world because of its popular electoral process. But the author have pointed out that the elections in India are not held in an ideal condition today. He pointed out the distorting factors of election process in India like enormous use of money and muscle power, criminalization of politics, booth capture, communalism, castism etc. According to him the first three general elections in India (1952-62) was held in a free and fair manner but the discernible decline in the electoral process was visible since the fourth general election held in 1967. Since then the electoral process in India has been eroded over the years in such a way that the upright persons are not coming to contest in election. In this article, the author reiterated the need of massive electoral reforms as well as enactment of stringent legal provisions governing the conduct of election in India.

Sudarshana Jha (2021) ^[8] in her paper “Electoral Politics and Democracy in India” stated about the use of money power in the elections in India. The author also mentioned about the limitations of the smaller parties in the electoral process of India. In this paper the author mentioned about the dominance of dynasty in the electoral politics of Assam. The author mentioned that the larger parties have more or less similar policies and the views of common voters have no significance in the electoral politics of India. Therefore the author suggested for massive reforms in the electoral politics of the country.

Yogendra Yadav (1996) ^[9] in his article “Reconfiguration of Indian Politics, State Assembly Election 1993-95” published in “Economic and Political Weekly” have highlighted the different phases of electoral politics in India beginning with the first phase of single party dominance to the competitive

electoral politics of post Congress era during 1993-1995. Especially he has reviewed the Legislative Assembly elections held during the period 1993-1995. In his analysis he has pointed out the unprecedented participation of the people in the democratic process in different states. He has explained this trend as the second ‘Democratic Upsurge’ in India.

Monirul Hussain (2003) ^[5], in his article “Governance and Electoral Process in India’s North East” analysed the governance process in North East India and its impact on the electoral process in the region. The author especially analysed the process of negotiation with the insurgency groups by the government and how such process influenced the electoral process in the region. The author in this article held that the incompetencies of the government in the North Eastern region and emergence of the insurgency groups had affected the democracy in the region.

In the article “Assam a Fractured Verdict” attempted to analyse the social pattern of voting through the 2009 Lok Sabha election. According to the author the social pattern of electoral politics reflect a fractured politics due to alignment of social groups with parties asserting its identity. The author stated that the ideology have taken a back seat as the political parties go for the state level alliances with the intention to enhance its individual seat tally. In this article Prof Goswami has depicted the polarization of Assam’s politics into communal and linguistic dimensions.

Prof. Sandhya Goswami (2001) ^[7] in her article “Changing electoral trend” highlighted the trend of electoral politics in Assam during the period 1985-1999. The author specially focused on the rise of AGP as a regional party in Assam and subsequently the emerging trend of alliance making in the electoral politics of the State. Prof. Goswami highlighted the political economic significance of new alliance between the AGP and BJP in the politics of the state.

Rational of the study

From the above study of the published literatures it is clear that there are different approaches in the study of electoral politics. At the same time there are lots of studies on the electoral politics of Assam. All these studies have highlighted the issues, trends and new dimensions of the electoral politics of the State. The trends of politics in the state have been kept on changing according to the exigencies of time. The political parties have changed alliances without any ideological considerations. Some scholars have pointed out the erosion of the democratic values in the electoral politics of India. Despite, the electoral politics is a dynamic subject. Therefore the scholars all across the discipline undertake the study on this subject. This study will be carried out with the following objectives.

Objectives of the study

1. To highlight the nature of electoral politics in Assam during the stated period.
2. To understand the voting behavior of the electors of Assam
3. To highlight the determinants of the voting behavior of the electors of Assam during recent times.

Methodology

The present study will be a descriptive and analytical study based on the secondary sources of data. The data used in this study are taken from different already published sources

i.e. research papers published in different journals, Books, Government reports available in different websites etc. Various books, research papers in the journals, reports published by the authorized agencies are surveyed as a reference in the study.

Findings

Electoral politics in Assam and potential determinants of the voting behavior

Assam is the largest state of the North East India. As per the census data of 2011 the total population of Assam is 3, 11, 69, 272. The registered voters of the state as per the data of the election commission of India in Lok Sabha election 2024 is 2, 45, 06, 236. In most of the elections since independence, the national political parties have dominated the electoral politics. Among the national political parties Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have played the crucial role in the electoral politics of the state. At the same time the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is the largest regional party in the electoral politics of Assam. The ruled the state for two terms i.e. 1985-1990 and 1996-2001. Apart from the AGP some other regional parties which are playing important role in the electoral politics are Bodoland People's Front (BPF), United People's Party Liberal (UPPL), All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF). The BPF and the UPPL are the dominating parties in the Bodoland Territorial Area (BTR). Both the parties in many times played very important role in the formation of the government in the state. BPF was the alliance partner with INC and BJP to form the government. At present the UPPL is the alliance partner with the BJP led National Democratic Alliance government in the state. In this study attempt will be made to understand the trends of electoral politics as well as the determinants of the voting behavior with the help of following election results.

Results of the Assam Legislative Assembly Election since 2011: An Analysis

In 2011, the people of Assam have voted for third consecutive time to the Congress Party in the State Legislative Assembly. Earlier the Congress party came to power in 2001 by ousting the ruling AGP led coalition government. Since then the people of Assam voted the Congress party led coalition government for three consecutive elections i.e. 2001, 2006 & 2011. The INC wins the absolute majority by winning 78 seats with the total vote share percentage of 39.39%. The main factors behind the winning the popular support by the INC for third consecutive term were clean image of the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, populist policies especially pro-poor policies, infrastructure development of the state etc. The people of Assam have lost faith on the regional parties due to misgovernance and rampant corruption of the previous AGP led Government. But the third term of the Tarun Gogoi led government was suffered by power rivalry within the ruling Congress Party. As a result of such rivalry the Congress leaders were divided into two groups.

At the same time there was a strong BJP wave in the country in the LOK Sabha election of 2014 under the leadership of Sri Narendra Modi, the then Chief Minister of Gujarat. The rising BJP wave have started in Assam politics too. In 2014 the BJP led NDA came to power at centre. In 2014 Lok Sabha election the BJP wins 7 seats. Its vote share also increasing to 36.50 out numbering the ruling Congress

party. The rival group of the chief minister Tarun Gogoi under the leadership of Sri Himanta Biswa Sarma had left the Congress Party and joined the BJP just before the Assam Legislative Assembly election of 2016. As a result of internal clash within the party the INC lost power in 2016 election and BJP came to power. The following table shows the election results and the vote share of the party in the Assam Legislative Assembly elections since 2011.

Table 1: The seats and vote share percentage by parties in Legislative Assembly Election since 2011

Party	2011	2016	2021
INC	78 (39.39%)	26 (30.96%)	29 (29.67%)
BJP	5 (11.47%)	60 (29.51%)	60 (33.21%)
AGP	10 (16.29%)	14 (8.14%)	9 (7.91%)
AIUDF	18 (12.57%)	13 (13.05%)	16 (9.29%)
BPF	12 (6.13%)	12 (3.94%)	4 (3.39%)
UPPL	-	-	6 (3.39%)
Others	3 (11.22%)	1 (11.04%)	(0.84%)

The above data in the Table-1 showed that the seat and vote share of the BJP party has increased in the Assam Legislative Assembly elections in the 2016 election. The BJP had own only 5 seats in the 2011 election but in 2016 election it wins 60 seats just 4 seats short for absolute majority in the 126 member House. On the other hand the INC lost the power in 2016 as it has lost the majority in the Assam Legislative Assembly. The number of seats of the INC was reduced to just 26 from 78 in the 2011 election. The vote sharing percentage also reduced to 30.96% (in 2016) from 39.39% (in 2011). The 2016 election result showed the decline of the vote share of the AGP also from 16.29% (10 seats) in 2011 to 8.14% (14 seats). However, being the alliance partner of BJP the number of seats of the AGP had increased from 10 (in 2011) to 14. The BPF which was alliance partner of the Congress Led Government of 2011 left the alliance with Congress and joined with BJP in 2016 election and had able to win the same number of seats (12). The support base of the AIUDF which had a strong support base in minority dominated constituencies of Assam had also witnessed decline in the number of seats in 2016. It won 18 seats in 2011 but it reduced to 13 only in the 2016 election. Thus, it can be said that there was growth of popular support base of the BJP and its alliance in the post 2011 election in Assam.

In 2021 election of Assam Legislative Assembly, the BJP again entered in pre-poll alliance with AGP and successfully regain the power in the state. The BJP and its alliance partner AGP wins 69 seats. In this election although BJP wins same number of seats (60) with previous election yet the vote sharing of BJP has increased from previous 29.51% to 33.21%. It is also noteworthy that BJP left the alliance with BPF and entered into alliance with the newly formed regional party UPPL in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) after the election. The 2021 election result signifies that the BJP being the ruling party has able to increase its popularity among the electors of Assam. On the other hand, the INC had wins only 29 seats. Although it wins 3 seats more than the previous election (from 26 to 29 seats), it is much lower than the required majority (64) seats in the Assembly. In this election the INC formed alliance with several smaller parties in the state but most of their alliance partners fail to win their seats.

Results of Lok Sabha Elections since 2014 in Assam: An Analysis

The general election of 2014 marked a remarkable change in the power structure of the country. It has replaced the decade long UPA rule by the NDA. In 2014 election, there was a strong BJP wave trough out the country under the leadership of Sri Narendra Damodar Modi, the then chief minister of Gujarat. The strong Modi led BJP wave had witnessed in Assam's politics also since 2014. The following table shows the rise of BJP in the Lok Sabha election in Assam in 2014.

Table 2: The seats and vote share percentage by parties in Lok Sabha since 2014, Total seats: 14

Party	2014	2019	2024
INC	3 (29.60%)	3 (35.79%)	3 (37.48%)
BJP	7 (36.50%)	9 (36.41%)	9 (37.43%)
AGP	-	-	1(6.46%)
AIUDF	3 (14.80%)	1 (7.87%)	-
Others	1 (9.62%)	1 (4.3%)	-
UPPL	-	-	1 (2.439%)

The above data in the table showed constant rise in the support base of BJP. It wins 7 seats in 2014, 9 seats in 2019 and again 9 seats in 2024. Accordingly the vote share of BJP also showed increased. On the other hand the seat won by the INC is remained constant. However, the percentage of vote sharing is increasing in each election.

Potential determinants of the voting behavior in Assam since 2011

Charismatic Leadership: The Charisma of the leaders of a party always attracts the voters in the elections. The aggressive campaigning of Sri Narendra Modi against the mega scams of the INC led UPA government had created a strong BJP wave led by Modi in the 2014 general election of India. The media have termed the BJP wave as the strong man Modi wave. With that strong campaigning Sri Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of India in 2014. The Modi wave also impacted the electors of Assam too. In 2014, although there was INC led government in Assam, due to Modi wave the BJP wins 7 seats out of 14 seats in Lok Sabha from Assam. Before the 2016 Assam Legislative Assembly election, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma then powerful minister of the late Tarun Gogoi led Govt. left INC and has joined in BJP along with a group of fellow INC leaders of the state. In 2016 election, the BJP declared Sri Sarbananda Sonowal as its chief Minister candidate. Sri Sonowal was very popular regional leader of Assam because of his role in removing the IMDT Act from the state. He was respected in the state because of his regional sentiments as well as clean image in public life. At the same time the newly joined Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma was also well known as a hard working efficient leader in the state. The personality of both the leaders has influenced the electors of Assam in every election.

The issue of Illegal Migration: The issue of illegal migration has become an important issue in the electoral politics of Assam since the historic Assam Movement. The AGP ascended to power in 1985 on this issue. But the party fails to fulfill the aspirations of the people of Assam regarding the deportation of illegal migrants especially from Bangladesh in its two terms in power i.e 1985 to 1990 and

1996 to 2001. Rather due to rampant corruption by the AGP leaders and lack of good governance the people of Assam voted for INC in 2001 election. The INC ruled the state for three consecutive terms. But in 2016, the BJP under the leadership of Sri Sarbananda Sonowal and Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma have once again raised the growing Muslim population due to illegal migration from neighboring Bangladesh and have termed their settlement in different districts of Assam especially in the lower part of Assam as a potential threat to the Assamese nationality and identity. The BJP had campaigned for protection of the Assamese nationality from the aggression of the illegal migrants in Assam. The Hindutva agenda of BJP and the threat of illegal migration had attracted the electors of Assam towards BJP.

Economic Development Agenda of BJP: In 2014 general Lok Sabha election, the BJP campaigned on economic growth, development and good governance in North-East India. The BJP election manifesto gives priority on the issues like infrastructure development, completion timely completion of ongoing projects i.e. construction of four lane highways, building bridge over the river Brahmaputra etc. The BJP manifesto also prioritized on addressing Assam's recurring flood issues through integrated river water management, strengthening border security through fencing, solving long standing insurgency issues etc. The successive BJP led NDA government at the centre gives special priority to NE India which it termed as Asta Lakshmi through its Look East Policy and has undertaken projects to upgrade its infrastructural development to connect neighboring countries. The importance given by the NDA government to the North East India in general Assam in particular influenced the voting behavior in Assam.

Populist policy: Now a day the populist policies played an important role in the elections. The populist policy refers to the pro-poor policies. Assam is amongst the less developed category states of India. The percentage of people living below the poverty line (BPL) was estimated to be 31.98% in 2011-12. This estimates approximately 101.27 lakhs. The per capita income of the people of Assam for the year 2021-22 was estimated as Rs. 100,761 (<https://des.assam.gov.in>). It shows that a large number of people are depending on the aids of the government. The previous INC ruled government also undertook pro-poor policies. The UPA government's policies like MGNREGA were very popular among the rural people. But the large scale corruption of the Congress leaders has resented the popular sentiments of the people of Assam despite the pro-poor policies. The BJP government at the centre and the Assam Government have taken the policy of direct transfer of the benefits to the beneficiaries to reduce corruption in the pro-poor schemes implementation. The BJP government at the centre undertakes different pro-poor policies i.e MGNREGA, Atal Amrit Avijan, Kishan Vikash Yojna, Ujjwala Scheme, PMAY, Old age pension scheme, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna etc. covering all the sections of the society. Apart from that, the state government also undertaking additional pro-poor policies and schemes in Assam. Some important such schemes are Orunodoi Scheme, Anundoram Borooah Award Scheme for meritorious students, Fee Waiver Schemes for poor students, Nijut Moina Scheme, Silpi Sambardhana, Apon Ghar Home Loan Subsidy, Abhinandan Education Loan

Subsidy, Swahid Kushal Konwar Sarbajanin Briddha Pension Achoni etc. Among all these schemes the most important scheme which attracted the electors of Assam towards the BJP is the Orunodoi Scheme.

Among all the beneficiary schemes the most popular scheme which help the BJP to win the votes of the rural people in the state is the Orunodoi Scheme. The scheme was first envisaged by Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma as a finance minister during his 2020-21 budget speech. The scheme was launched on 2nd October 2020. At the initial stage the scheme was covering 24 lac poor household of Assam and they were given Rs. 830/- per month. The scheme was intended to empower the rural women as well as to provide relief to the rural families to meet the crisis emerging out of the unprecedented Covid pandemic. At present, the Government of Assam has launched the Orunodoi 3.0 which will cover 37 lac poor household of the state. Each household will receive Rs. 1250/- per month. This beneficiary scheme has created a large support base of the ruling BJP in the electoral politics of the state.

Importance to Regional Ethnic Communities: In the Assam Legislative Assembly election 2016, the BJP made alliance with the organizations representing smaller tribal ethnic communities of Assam like Karbi, Dimas, Tiwa, Rabha, Missings etc. The BJP gives party candidature to the influencing leaders of each tribal group and through that it was successful to win the votes of these communities. In 2016, the BJP made alliance with Bodoland People's Front (BPF) in Bodoland Teritorriavl Area (BTR) and in 2021 it entered into alliance with United People's Party Liberal (UPPL). Thus, it can be said that the BJP's policy of making alliance with the organizations representing the smaller ethnic groups also influenced the voting behavior in Assam.

Conclusion

The electoral politics of Assam exemplifies an interaction of multiple issues like Assamese nationality, threats of illegal migration along with the socio-economic development. The leadership factor plays an important role in the politics of Assam. The important aspect of electoral politics of Assam is mobilization of the smaller ethnic groups into the alliance of the larger political parties. The dominance of the national political parties is also discernible in the politics of the state. On the other hand the support base of the regional parties in the state are eroded gradually. Their support base is confined to a particular region within a specific community. On the other hand the influence of the BJP has been extended to every section of the people of Assam. The strong nationalist ideology of BJP is growing popular among the electors of Assam today. The development agenda of the BJP led NDA government at the centre and its increasing focus to the North East India wins the sentiments of the electors of the Assam. Now the popular sentiments of Assam are growing beyond the confinement of regional boundaries. The firm stand and eviction policy of the BJP government against the illegal encroachers of the government land especially by the immigrant Muslims helped them to garner support of the indigenous Assamese people in their favour. Earlier the people of Assam have supported AGP because of this sentiment. At the same time BJP wins the support of the rural electors with the help of the pro-poor policies i.e. beneficiary schemes. On the other

hand the INC is losing the support of the people in the electoral politics of Assam because of the factors like allegations of the mega scams, failure to implement the infrastructure development schemes, internal clash between the leaders of the party and anti-incumbency factors.

It is already mentioned that the subject of electoral politics and voting behavior is a dynamic subject. Therefore, it has become the relevant subject of research irrespective of time. Further study on the subject is needed to unearth the new dimensions on this topic.

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