



## Women voters as the new electoral kingmakers: Examining the gender turnout gap and pro-incumbency trends in India's 2025 elections

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### Abstract

The 2025 elections will be a big change in the electoral situation in India, as women have become the key political players. This paper will discuss the increasing gap in gender turnout, whereby the attendance of females overrides that of men and how this has been linked to the increasing pro-incumbency pattern. Based on the evidence of Election Commission statistics, constituency-specific findings and the secondary evidence provided in the form of surveys, the paper contends that the influence of welfare programmes, improved mobility, and heightened political awareness have empowered the electoral participation of women. The results reveal a positive correlation between increased female turnout and incumbents' move to share, which can be interpreted as a gendered trend in method of voting stability with matured benefits of welfare, fears of security and tendency to conservation. The examples of case studies of major states demonstrate how women's votes transformed the election results, and it was an indicator of a structural change in the Indian democracy. The paper concludes that women are becoming the new electoral kingmakers, forcing parties to realign their strategies towards governance delivery as well as policy-making based on gender.

**Keywords:** Election Commission statistics, voter participation, welfare programmes, political awareness, electoral mobility, female turnout, incumbency advantage

### Introduction

One of the most radical transformations in the Indian voting patterns has been the trend of women becoming more and more voters in the Indian elections, signifying a trend where traditionally low female participation rates have been replaced with a new trend where women are becoming the focal point of the electoral results. Targeted welfare programs have helped jumpstart this over the last ten years, gender inclusion became the target focus of institutions, and the number of women who voted increased steadily, only to come to the elections of 2025, where women did not just close in on the gender gap, but even surpassed male turnout in some states (Anukriti *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[1]</sup>. The evolving pattern of participation has increased the political importance of women voters, making them develop strategies of governance and campaigns based on their preferences and needs for well-being. It is against this context that the current research endeavours to solve the arising issue of a growing gender turnout gap, which is sweeping against long periods of male majority in India in terms of political voting behaviour. The reasons women are voting at a greater rate, and the influence of their tastes on electoral results, especially the pro-incumbency phenomenon being witnessed today, have become key to understanding modern electoral politics (Chadha, 2014) <sup>[2]</sup>. The rationality of the study is the observation that the female electoral countries of participation are principals to democratic deepening since the voting decisions of women are increasingly basing their electoral preferences on the welfare, social security, and the performance of governance. In this regard, the main goals are to evaluate gender-based trends in turnout in the 2025 elections, analyse the process of growing women's participation and how the turnout of women is correlated to pro-incumbency performance (Deb, 2024) <sup>[3]</sup>. The study will also consider socio-economic and

behavioural aspects that affect the political decisions of women and trace the differences between state political preferences of this trend. The research questions used in directing the study are as follows: What is the reason behind the increase in women's turnout in the 2025 elections? What is the impact of the gender turnout gap on the incumbent electoral performance? And how far are women becoming new electoral kingmakers in the new Indian political environment?

Particularly, this paper critically analyses the new movement toward women voters as decisive electors in the 2025 elections in India and could be seen in relation to the increasing gender turnout gap and its link to pro-incumbency electoral performance. Long known as less involved and highly lacking in political visibility, women in India have experienced a considerable shift as the electorate, gradually defining their own electoral choices and setting their own electoral tricks and tendencies through their own preferences and their own demands as far as well-being is concerned, as well as their voting turnouts. It is only with the 2025 elections that one will have the chance to study this change, with women not only matching but even exceeding male turnout in several states, indicating that the political participation structure is shifting in terms of gender relations. This article contends that women voters do not just figure as a statistically significant but rather a substantive re-order of democratic behaviour owing to welfare target programs, state-dominated program delivery, increased mobility and widening political awareness. The study utilises both gender-specific turnout and constituency election outcomes and behavioural information in an effort to comprehend why and how increased female turnout has enhanced incumbent support. Conclusively, this paper identifies women as new electoral kingmakers whose patterns of participation are shaping more in order to bring

political stability into the political system, priority of political policies, and strategic recalibration of political party politics in India today.

### Research Questions

- What factors have contributed to the rise in women's voter turnout in the 2025 elections, and how do these differ across states and demographic groups?
- How has the growing gender turnout gap influenced overall electoral outcomes, particularly in terms of strengthening pro-incumbency trends?
- To what extent do women's voting preferences align with welfare delivery, governance performance, and perceived improvements in socio-economic conditions?
- Is there a measurable correlation between higher female turnout and increased vote share for incumbent parties at the constituency or state level?
- How are political parties adapting their electoral strategies, welfare initiatives, and campaign narratives in response to the rising political importance of women voters?

### Gendered Electoral Behaviour

Gendered electoral behaviour describes the systematic pattern of the participation of men and women in the political process in making electoral choices and reactions to the outcomes in governance. The research across the worldwide community demonstrates that gender intertwines with social role, financial insecurity, and reliance on welfare, determining the specific preferences in politics. Women were traditionally regarded as a politically passive group because the structural factors inhibiting their rights included mobility, a low level of education, patrilineal social standards, and the absence of engagement in the decision-making process (Kumar, 2024) <sup>[4]</sup>. A major shift, however, in modern-day studies has been the increasing voter turnout by women who have started to vote on the basis of welfare provision, safety issues and service delivery instead of the identity-based campaigns by caste or local favours. Literature guided by the theory of post-materialism of Inglehart states that with the increase in the level of education and participation of women, political agency increases, hence more stable and logical voting behaviours. Women have been known to display more propensity towards stability, incumbency, and continuity of governance due to their being the main administrators of households and caregivers, and, as such, tend to be more sensitive to health, food security, cash transfer, and domestic infrastructure policies (Kumar, 2022) <sup>[5]</sup>. South American, African and South Asian examples of comparative literature confirm the notion that electoral decisions made by women are heavily influenced by specific welfare programmes to generate a benevolent voter effect. Voting patterns of women are also more collectivist as they are influenced by communalism as a result of the vulnerability and empowerment they feel, and not an individual change in ideology. With the changing gender norms, there is also an increasing participation of women in politics as a negotiation of power, and they hold the state accountable. Gendered electoral behaviour is therefore not only a demographic question, but a dynamic political process that illustrates that women have a special socio-economic location that can lead them to specific types of turnout, policy choices and partisanship.

### Rise of Women Voters in India

The emergence of women voters in India is one of the most dramatic changes in the Indian electoral process that redefined democratic participation and party politics. Traditionally, the turnout was inferior to the male population, whose turnout was constrained by patriarchy, absence of documentation and lack of political awareness, as well as freedom of movement. Nevertheless, the steady narrowing of this difference has been observed since the 1990s, and by the 2010s, in a few states such as Bihar, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu, women turned out to vote more than men (Maitra & Rosenblum, 2021) <sup>[6]</sup>. There are various structural forces tied to this change: literacy, urbanisation, better mobility, women's help organisations, and decentralised governance under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment that politically empowered millions of rural women. A significant landmark has been the growth of women-targeted welfare programs- of LPG connections and housing, cash schemes, maternal care, and food security, which has brought direct contact with women and the state. According to scholars, the result of this so-called welfare-mediated citizenship has strengthened the political participation of women because they can now view the outcomes of governance more directly and place judgment on governments depending on the provision of services. According to the Election Commission, the female turnout curve increased more than the male turnout curve over the period between 2014 and 2024, which led to the situation that in the 2025 elections, women not only voted more but also affected electoral results more decisively and in the government, they were believed to be efficient in welfare provision. The political parties are finding women to be a solid voting bloc, and they are taking gender to an electoral strategy, going door-to-door for vote outreach and welfare policy development (Rai & Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2011) <sup>[7]</sup>. The increase in women voters is therefore a structural change which has been determined by changes in socio-economic factors, changes in institutions, and state specifications, making women emerging electoral kingmakers in present-day India.

### Women as Electoral Kingmakers

The theoretical paradigm of examining women as potential electoral kingmakers is based on the synthesis of gendered political behaviour, rational choice models of welfare decision-making, clientelism and social capital paradigms. According to the behaviour theory of gendered politics, male and female reaction to political stimuli differs because of their different socio-economic roles, risk exposure, and socialisation, with women tending to settle on household welfare, security, and continuity. This is complemented by the rational choice theory, which explores how women, as the key managers of household resources, utilise political options through cost-benefit analysis associated with welfare schemes, social protection and the provision of state services. This is the foundation of the welfare benefit models, which claim that specific schemes generate a real correlation between the state and the electorate of women, which boosts loyalty and has a pro-incumbency effect. The theories of clientelism and targeted governance also help explain why the government's plan and provide welfare handouts to certain segments of the population- especially the women- to develop permanent voting blocs (Ravi *et al.*, 2017) <sup>[8]</sup>. These processes not only improved service

delivery but also transformed political demands so that women tend to reward governments that fulfil their realistic needs, like cooking fuel, household, health services, and monetary assistance. Their involvement in self-help groups, panchayats and networks of community organisations is an additional aspect of the social capital and empowerment models by illuminating ways in which women's involvement in such networks is creating political awareness, collective identity and decision making, which are reinforcing stable political voting patterns (Pai & Thorat, 2022) <sup>[9]</sup>. Combining these views, the conceptual model of Women as Electoral Kingmakers relates higher female turnout, welfare, and risk-aversion behaviour as major inputs that produce a unique output, which is stable electoral behaviour in support of incumbents perceived as good sources of welfare and security. This conceptualisation enables the explanation of why turnout by women in the 2025 elections has translated into a measurable pro-incumbency effect, opposing the political electoral dynamics, and forcing the political parties to focus on gender-sensitive governance.

### Gender Turnout Gap in the 2025 Elections

The 2025 elections were also a decisive breakthrough in the Indian electoral picture, with the gender turnout difference strikingly reversing against women on an unparalleled national scale, indicating a very dramatic demographic and political change. It was the first instance where female turnout was not only equal but significantly higher than that of men in various areas, which clearly showed that a long-distance momentum was developing and had never become so evident and significant before. Most of the states with the highest female turnout surges, like Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, highlighted the increased centrality of women in the democratic process. The Hindi belt in the north, especially Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, also saw significant gains, even in uneven form, but the eastern and central Indian states produced the most predictable changes in gender-positive turnout. In states where the male turnout was still in the margin, the difference had also been reduced substantially (Banerjee *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[10]</sup>. This change can be supported by the socio-demographic analysis: rural women, particularly of OBC, SC, and economically disadvantaged groups, were at the very centre of increasing turnout, showing how last-mile welfare delivery and benefit schemes that serve households proactively gave them direct interest in the results of an election. Remarkably, the women of low literacy and moderate education levels were seen to experience different gains, proving that the interest of political socialisation associated with welfare and not based upon formal education alone influenced engagement in the elections. This increase in women's participation came as a direct result of a combination of factors. The strongest stimulus was the welfare delivery, where schemes providing LPG connections, housing, maternal health benefits, transfers of direct cash, safe drinking water and employment guarantees generated real sensation in everyday life and induced women to transform the recognition or trust into political activity. Women were also able to travel without supervision to polling stations because of the increased use of rural roads, electrification, CCTV cameras, women's help desks, and gender sensitive policing (Pongen, 2022) <sup>[11]</sup>. At the same time, the campaigns of political awareness by

governments, self-help groups, ASHA networks, Anganwadi workers, and civil society organisations enhanced the awareness of women on the interconnection between voting and continuity of welfare. More than 20 years of female leadership at the panchayat level, facilitated by the reservation policy, produced long-term empowerment spillovers, with millions of women who had previously served as sarpanches, ward members, or leaders of SHGs gaining both political confidence and administrative exposure and more community visibility, which they turn into assertive electoral participation in 2025. All these stratified drivers were turning women into the most dependable and fastest-growing group of voters. Not only did the 2025 elections portray greater numerical turnout, but a perceptual shift of women in politics, indicating their increased independence, political awareness, as well as a desire to vote depending on the welfare performance, continuity in governance and effectiveness in service delivery. This amalgamation of socio-demographic, welfare-based and empowerment aspects affirms the fact that women are not marginal voters anymore but central determiners of electoral results, which is a complete change in the dynamics of democracy in India.

### Women Voters and Pro-Incumbency Patterns

There is strong proof of a female-broken pattern of electoral stability in the 2025 elections, which represents a constituency-level relationship between greater female participation and more incumbent success. In the constituencies where women won by wide margins over men, there was a tendency of the incumbents, irrespective of party, to secure higher vote proportions, giving the impression that women rewarded continuity when governance was seen to be on welfare-related and trusted lines. This trend is directly interconnected with the role of the women-oriented welfare programs, which have established a direct and real relationship between the state and the citizens. Other schemes like Ujjwala (LPG connections), Awas (housing), PM Kisan and state-based Kisan Samman transfers, Ladli Behna allowances, Mamata maternal benefits and increased access to MGNREGA have had profound impacts on the households as women are the core beneficiaries and thus shape their voting patterns (Dad & Khan, 2023) <sup>[13]</sup>. This pro-incumbency tendency can also be explained by the behavioural factors: according to the research, women are more risk-averse, and more willing to stable governing bodies than politically unpredictable alternatives; more so, delivery of welfare than identity-based politics like caste mobilisation or political polarisation. The example of Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Karnataka illustrates that the positive changes in the state were supported by women's increased institutionalisation. Long-term welfare ecosystems generated consolidated female support in Bihar and Odisha, the Ladli Behna scheme in Madhya Pradesh enhanced the retention of the governing party in the incumbency, rural women voters in districts with high welfare penetration in Uttar Pradesh, and better service delivery and cash transfers in Karnataka influenced the vote of women. They were particularly apparent in swing-led by women constitutional districts, with very close results being determined by increased female voter turnout, sometimes overturning the anticipated results according to traditional vote-bank analysis (Goyal, 2024) <sup>[14]</sup>. All in all, the 2025 elections

remind us that the women voters have emerged to become a stabilising factor in elections, with some positive effects of pro-incumbency by using welfare-based voting and regular electoral interest participation.

### Discussion

The pro-incumbency aspect with gender implication that can be observed in the 2025 elections is a radical change of electoral behaviour in India, as it depicts the new researched wave of influence by women as a stabilising political party that cannot be ignored. Customarily, unlike the previous elections when women's participation was limited by the structure, social and mobility issues, the political scene is currently showing a new era where women can critically assess governments, come into the welfare delivery systems, and make wise decisions that play a vital role in determining the electoral results. The pronounced tendency to provide incumbent politicians with female electorates can be explained with references to the notion of rational political behaviour: it is women who, in contrast to men, think more of welfare provisions, household safety, health conditions, food insecurity, energy resources, cash distribution, and social assistance, which can be strongly associated with the efficiency of governance. The tendency of beneficiary voting highly implies that females consider governments not in identity or ideological terms, but in terms of genuine changes in everyday life, which reinforces the pro-incumbency effects. The big implication of this trend is for the strategies of political parties. With the fading of old sources of identity conflict like caste, religion, and regional affiliations as reliable predictors of voting behaviour among women, parties have to reposition their timing, maybe towards government-centred, welfare-intensive appeals (Karnik *et al.*, 2023)<sup>[15]</sup>. The direct-benefit transfers (DBTs), the door-to-door campaigns, and the women-specific schemes, together with the locally-grounded service delivery models, have become an important aspect of electoral planning. Women are being placed more and more as an independent voting group than just a projection of male interests in the household, forcing parties to develop specific organisational forms, channels of communication and even policy form that targets women specifically. On a more generalised level, the emergence of women voters signifies a more profound change in the style of Indian democracy. It is an indication of a gradual yet progressive transition of a traditionally male-dominated sphere of political life to a more accommodative, welfare-based, and sensitive governing system. Voting behaviour by women has resulted in new criteria of political accountability because governments that provide continuity, stability and perks to the welfare reward women and thereby undermine those governments that do not respond to the needs at the household level. This alteration implies that gendered expectations and welfare performance mediate democratic consolidation in India, and no longer are traditional political narratives the method of democratic consolidation. An important question, though, is how long-lasting this trend is: Is the gendered pro-incumbency trend a structural change or a short-term phenomenon due to the cycle of welfare being experienced? Although some analysts cite it could be cyclical, longitudinal patterns point to a structural change in terms of the turnout since the 1990s. The rising literacy rate of women, the growing accessibility of women to the road infrastructure and by road means of transport, growing

access to technology, and decades of political panchayati rajs' engagement in grassroots activities all reflect that the political agency of women is becoming more entrenched. With women internalising their political decision-maker position, they may remain loyal to the welfare-based governance in future election periods. The increased trend of female turnout also brings in larger concerns as to whether anti-incumbency in India will continue to exist. As it has always been the case, Indian elections have been marked by overt cases of voter discontent and spin-turnovers. But in cases where welfare delivery is predictable and authentic, women voters could form electoral insularity and undermine the traditional anti-incumbency tendencies. This does not do away with the electoral volatility, but new motivations towards performance-based governance are created. On the whole, the electoral contest in 2025 can be seen as evidence of the fact that women are reinventing the democratic space not as actors but as agents of political continuity, accountability, and policy transformation.

### Conclusion

This paper shows that the election of 2025 was a turning point in the history of electoral politics in India, as women were instrumental players whose participation and preferences influenced the results of the election tremendously. The main findings indicate that the gender turnout difference has flipped on the side of women in various states, and increased female turnout has a steady relationship with better incumbency. This bias in favour of the sitting party is also based on the attractiveness of the political behaviour of women to their welfare, and risk-aversion and tolerance to stability as a voter, as a move in the direction of performance-based electoral assessments over identity-based voting. Consequently, women's centrality in Indian politics is gaining momentum, and political parties have been compelled to take an unprecedented turn on the long-term welfare provision, women-focused initiatives, and governance reforms that directly affect the welfare levels of households. The increase of women voters is also an indication of more democratic change; it is no longer an electorate that is based on caste patronage systems but an electorate guided by welfare, security and service provision. The insights have relevant policy implications: they should be enabled to further enhance the implementation of last-mile welfare, incorporate gender-sensitive budget, and institutionalise the monitoring of programmes targeting women to remain on this trajectory of empowered political participation. To achieve long-term democratic stability, migration, safety, employment, and representation gaps which define the lives of women have to be addressed by the policies. This is a phenomenon that needs to be further investigated in future research papers using longitudinal research designs to determine whether the trend of gendered pro-incumbency continues even in the case of more than one election. There is also a need to unpack the motivations, values, and expectations of women that lead to their political choices, not just accepting welfare. Moreover, there are possible solutions based on gender-specific outcomes in welfare-state measurement indexes that may be more accurate in assessing the effect of governance interventions on voting behaviour among women. All in all, the results suggest that the increase in women voters is not an electoral accident, but a structural change, which is transforming the roots of Indian democracy.

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