

Beyond Caste: Determinants of Urban Voting Behaviour in Mumbai

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Abstract

Urban electoral behaviour in India has traditionally been understood through the lens of caste-based political mobilization. However, rapid urbanization, expanding welfare programmes, and increasing exposure to mass media and political campaigns are reshaping how urban voters evaluate political choices. In metropolitan contexts such as Mumbai - characterized by high social mobility, occupational diversity, and intense political competition the relevance of caste as the primary determinant of voting behaviour warrants closer examination.

This study investigates the factors shaping urban voting behaviour in Mumbai, with a particular focus on influences beyond caste. It examines the role of governance performance, welfare delivery, leadership, religious narratives, and everyday urban concerns such as housing, infrastructure, employment, and public services in shaping electoral decision-making. Based on primary qualitative fieldwork, the study captures how voters themselves interpret and justify their political choices.

The findings suggest that while caste remains embedded in the broader political structure, its direct influence on urban voting behaviour is limited. Instead, development-oriented concerns emerge as the dominant determinant, alongside context-specific identity factors such as religion and regional belonging. The study contributes to ongoing debates on the evolving nature of political mobilization in urban India by demonstrating a shift from caste-centric to multi-dimensional voting behaviour in metropolitan contexts.

Keywords: Urban voting behaviour; Caste and politics; Electoral behaviour; Urban governance; Mumbai; Identity politics

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Introduction

Caste in Indian Electoral Politics

From B. R. Ambedkar in the West to Jogendranath Mandal in the East, and from E. V. Ramasamy in the South to Jagjivan Ram in the North, India has witnessed a long history of social reform movements aimed at challenging caste-based inequalities and advocating for the rights of marginalized communities. These movements, initially rooted in social transformation, gradually assumed political significance and began to shape electoral processes in independent India. Over time, caste emerged as a central axis of political mobilisation, influencing both voter behaviour and party strategies.

The institutionalization of caste as a category of governance can be traced back to the colonial period, when the British administration formally incorporated caste into the census beginning in the late nineteenth century. This practice, which continued until 1941, contributed to the codification and politicization of caste identities. In the early twentieth century, debates surrounding political representation further intensified the salience of caste. The Communal Award of 1932, which proposed separate electorates for the depressed classes, led to a major ideological confrontation between Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar, culminating in the Poona Pact that replaced separate electorates with reserved seats. This marked a crucial moment in embedding caste within the framework of political representation.

In the post-independence period, caste continued to shape electoral politics through both institutional mechanisms and political mobilization. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in the 1990s significantly altered the political landscape by enhancing the visibility and political participation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This period witnessed the rise of several caste-based political parties, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party, which mobilized voters along caste lines and reconfigured electoral competition. Political parties across states have since strategically constructed caste coalitions, selecting candidates based on the dominant caste composition of constituencies. For instance, parties in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have frequently relied on caste-based vote banks, with leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav mobilizing backward caste identities to consolidate support. These strategies reflect the continued salience of caste as an organizing principle in electoral competition as voters tend to prefer candidates who share their social identity.

The Indian Constitution further institutionalizes caste within electoral politics through provisions for political reservation. Under Article 332, seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in legislative assemblies and Parliament to ensure adequate representation. At present, out of 543 Lok Sabha constituencies, 131 seats (approximately 24.13 percent) are reserved for SC and ST communities, following the delimitation exercise of 2008. These provisions reflect the continued recognition of caste as a critical dimension of political representation in India.

Taken together, the historical evolution of caste-based mobilization, the strategic use of caste by political parties, and the institutionalization of caste through constitutional provisions demonstrate that caste has long served as a foundational determinant of voting behaviour. Consequently, caste has historically structured electoral competition in India, shaping both political participation and party strategies across regions.

Caste Politics in Maharashtra

The trajectory of caste politics in Maharashtra is deeply rooted in the anti-caste movements led by B. R. Ambedkar, whose efforts marked the beginning of organized political assertion by marginalized communities. Ambedkar not only challenged the social hierarchies embedded in the caste system but also laid the foundation for Dalit political mobilization through organizations such as the Scheduled Castes Federation, thereby initiating a shift from social reform to political participation.

Despite this early mobilization, Maharashtra's electoral politics has historically been dominated by the Maratha-Kunbi caste bloc. The Maratha community, through its control over rural cooperative institutions and agrarian networks, has exercised significant influence over political power in the state. This dominance is reflected in the composition of political leadership, with a majority of Chief Ministers of Maharashtra belonging to the Maratha community. The consolidation of economic and political power enabled the Marathas to shape electoral outcomes and maintain a stronghold over state politics for decades. This entrenched dominance highlights the continued centrality of caste in structuring political power at the state level.

At the same time, the role of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalit communities has remained crucial in shaping electoral competition. While Ambedkarite politics sought to unify Dalit voters, fragmentation within Dalit political formations has often limited their electoral

impact. In response, political parties in Maharashtra have increasingly adopted strategies of caste alliances, attempting to consolidate support across multiple caste groups rather than relying on a single dominant bloc. Alliances such as the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi illustrate efforts to bring together Dalits, OBCs, and other marginalized communities into a broader political coalition.

Thus, caste politics in Maharashtra reflects a complex interplay between historical dominance by Maratha elites and the evolving assertion of marginalized groups. While caste continues to influence political representation and party strategies, electoral competition in the state increasingly depends on the ability of political actors to construct and sustain cross-caste alliances.

Demographic Context of Mumbai

Mumbai, as India's foremost metropolitan city, has historically been shaped by large-scale migration from different regions of the country. Its transformation from a regional port city into a national economic hub has attracted populations from across India, resulting in a highly heterogeneous urban electorate. Migrant communities from states such as Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar have established strong socio-cultural enclaves across the city. For instance, areas such as Sion, Matunga, and Dharavi have significant Tamil-speaking populations, while suburbs like Ghatkopar, Vile Parle, and Mulund are known for their substantial Gujarati-speaking communities.

This linguistic and regional diversity has important implications for electoral politics. Unlike rural constituencies, where caste networks are often deeply entrenched, urban constituencies such as Mumbai are characterized by overlapping identities based on language, region, and occupation. Political parties are therefore compelled to account for this diversity when selecting candidates, often prioritizing individuals who can appeal to dominant linguistic or regional groups within specific constituencies. In such contexts, the salience of caste as a singular determinant of voting behaviour may be relatively diluted, as voters may instead align with broader community identities or pragmatic considerations.

At the same time, Mumbai exhibits sharp socio-economic inequalities, ranging from affluent neighbourhoods such as Powai and South Mumbai to densely populated informal settlements like Dharavi and Govandi. These disparities shape distinct political priorities among voters. For middle-class and upper-middle-class residents, issues such as infrastructure, governance,

and economic growth often take precedence. In contrast, residents of informal settlements may prioritise access to housing, basic services, and welfare schemes.

The combination of migration, linguistic diversity, and socio-economic variation has thus transformed Mumbai into a complex metropolitan electorate where multiple factors intersect to shape political behaviour. Electoral competition in such contexts is less likely to be determined by a single axis of identity and more likely to reflect a combination of community affiliations, leadership appeal, and issue-based considerations. This transformation suggests that urban electoral behaviour may be shaped by a broader set of determinants, raising questions about the continued primacy of caste in metropolitan politics.

Urban Politics and the Relevance of Caste

The relevance of caste in urban electoral politics has been a subject of increasing scholarly debate. While caste has historically structured political behaviour in India, its salience in metropolitan contexts appears to be undergoing transformation. Urbanisation alters the social environment within which political identities operate. Unlike rural settings, where caste networks are deeply embedded in everyday social and economic interactions, cities tend to weaken these traditional ties by introducing anonymity, occupational mobility, and diverse social interactions. As a result, caste may no longer function as the sole or dominant determinant of voting behaviour in urban constituencies.

Several studies suggest that urban voters are more likely to be influenced by factors such as governance performance, development outcomes, and leadership appeal. Research by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar highlights that urban electorates often display more fragmented and issue-based voting patterns compared to rural areas, where caste remains a stronger organising principle. Similarly, Allison Berland Kaul, in her study on urban voting behaviour, finds that voters in cities increasingly evaluate political choices based on governance, economic development, and party performance alongside identity considerations.

At the same time, class dynamics play a significant role in shaping urban political preferences. Socio-economic position influences the priorities of voters, with middle-class and upper-income groups often focusing on infrastructure and economic growth, while lower-income groups emphasise access to welfare schemes and basic services. Leadership also emerges as a critical factor in urban elections, where charismatic leaders and strong party figures can transcend traditional identity boundaries and consolidate support across diverse social groups.

Thus, while caste continues to remain present in urban political discourse, its relative importance appears to be mediated by class, governance concerns, and leadership appeal, making urban voting behaviour more complex and multi-dimensional.

Research Question

What factors shape voting behaviour among urban voters in Mumbai, and to what extent do considerations beyond caste influence their electoral choices?

Objectives

1. To explore the factors beyond caste that influence voting behaviour among urban voters in Mumbai.
2. To examine the role of religious identity and political leadership in shaping voting decisions in urban contexts.
3. To analyse how urban socio-economic conditions and governance concerns shape voter priorities and political preferences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design to examine the determinants of voting behaviour among urban voters in Mumbai. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the study seeks to understand how voters perceive, interpret, and explain the factors influencing their electoral choices rather than measure causal relationships or establish statistical generalisations. The exploratory nature of the study is particularly relevant in the context of urban electoral politics, where traditional determinants such as caste increasingly interact with emerging concerns related to governance, leadership, religion, and regional identity.

The study aims to explore whether caste continues to function as a primary determinant of voting behaviour in metropolitan settings and to understand the meanings voters attach to alternative factors shaping their political preferences. By foregrounding the lived experiences and narratives of respondents, the research seeks to capture the evolving nature of political behaviour in contemporary urban India.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Mumbai, the capital city of Maharashtra and one of India's largest metropolitan centres. Mumbai presents an ideal setting for examining urban voting behaviour due to its heterogeneous electorate, extensive migration, linguistic diversity, and pronounced socio-economic inequalities. The city has historically attracted migrants from various regions of India, resulting in a politically diverse population characterised by multiple social identities and varying political priorities.

Fieldwork was conducted across six neighbourhoods Dadar, Dharavi, Chembur, Ghatkopar, Mulund, and Goregaon. These locations were selected to capture variations in socio-economic status, migration patterns, and residential contexts. While areas such as Dharavi represent densely populated informal settlements with concerns related to housing and public services, suburbs such as Mulund and Goregaon consist predominantly of middle-class and upper-middle-class populations. Dadar and Chembur, on the other hand, reflect the city's linguistic and cultural diversity and provide insights into the political attitudes of both native Marathi-speaking residents and migrant communities.

The diversity of these locations enabled the study to examine urban voting behaviour across different social and economic settings and capture the complex interplay between identity, development, and governance.

Sampling and Respondent Selection

The study employed purposive sampling to identify respondents who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on electoral behaviour in Mumbai. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the objective of the study was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to explore how different categories of urban voters perceive political choices and electoral determinants.

A total of 27 respondents participated in the study. The sample included both Marathi-speaking natives and non-Marathi migrants residing in Mumbai. Efforts were made to ensure diversity across age, occupation, migration status, and socio-economic background. Respondents included residents of chawls, informal settlements, and apartment complexes, as well as individuals engaged in occupations ranging from street vending and service-sector employment to salaried professions.

The inclusion of respondents from varied social and economic backgrounds enabled the study to capture multiple viewpoints and identify patterns as well as divergences in political attitudes across different sections of the urban electorate.

Data Collection

Primary data for the study was collected through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to express their opinions in their own words while ensuring comparability across interviews. Questions focused on issues such as caste, religion, leadership, development, governance, party loyalty, and regional identity in shaping voting behaviour.

Data collection was facilitated using KoboToolbox, an open-source digital platform for survey administration and data management. The use of KoboToolbox enabled real-time recording and systematic organisation of responses, thereby reducing the possibility of transcription errors and improving the efficiency of data management.

Fieldwork was conducted during March and April 2026 across the selected locations in Mumbai. In addition to the formal questionnaire, informal conversations were held with respondents to gain deeper insights into their experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding electoral politics. These conversations often generated nuanced narratives that helped contextualise the quantitative trends emerging from the questionnaire responses.

The combination of structured questions and open-ended interactions enabled the study to move beyond numerical trends and capture the meanings respondents attached to their political choices.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded and grouped into themes such as caste, religion, development, leadership, party loyalty, and regional identity. Emerging patterns were then interpreted alongside secondary literature and electoral trends.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and anonymity has been maintained by using respondent codes (e.g., R12, Dadar).

Review of Literature

The concept of caste in India has a long and complex history, rooted in both indigenous social structures and colonial interpretations. The term “caste” itself is derived from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning lineage or breed, and was later adopted by European scholars to describe India’s hierarchical social order (Dirks, 2001). However, this anglicized term does not fully capture the indigenous concept of *jati*, which refers to localized, endogamous social groups defined by occupation, kinship, and social practices. While *varna* represents a broad four-fold classification in classical Hindu texts, *jati* constitutes the lived reality of caste as experienced in everyday social interactions (Bayly, 1999). The conflation of *varna*, *jati*, and “caste” in colonial and postcolonial discourse has contributed to a simplified understanding of a far more complex social system.

Colonial interventions played a significant role in institutionalizing caste identities. The British administration’s efforts to classify and enumerate populations through the census formalized caste categories and reinforced rigid social hierarchies (Dirks, 2001). This process transformed caste from a relatively fluid system of social organization into a more fixed and administratively recognized identity. Over time, caste became not only a social marker but also a political category, shaping access to resources, representation, and power.

In the post-independence period, caste was further embedded within the democratic framework through policies of affirmative action and political representation. Constitutional provisions for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) institutionalized caste as a key axis of political representation. Thus, the historical evolution of caste - from *varna* and *jati* to a politicized category provides the foundation for understanding its enduring relevance in contemporary Indian electoral politics.

Caste has been widely recognised as a central determinant of voting behaviour in India. Scholars have consistently argued that electoral politics in India cannot be understood without examining the role of caste-based identities and their mobilisation. According to Yogendra Yadav, the expansion of democratic participation in the post-Mandal era led to the political

assertion of historically marginalized caste groups, transforming electoral competition into a contest between caste-based social coalitions (Yadav, 1999). This process, often described as the “democratization of politics,” enabled backward and lower caste groups to emerge as significant political actors.

Similarly, Christophe Jaffrelot argues that caste has evolved into a form of political capital, with caste groups functioning as organized voting blocs that can be mobilized by political parties (Jaffrelot, 2003). The rise of parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party demonstrates how caste-based mobilisation can be translated into electoral success. These parties have strategically constructed caste coalitions, appealing to shared identities and collective grievances.

Kanchan Chandra further theorizes this phenomenon through the concept of ethnic or identity-based voting, suggesting that voters often support candidates who represent their social group, particularly in contexts where identity is politically salient (Chandra, 2004). Political parties, in turn, reinforce these identities by selecting candidates and crafting campaigns that appeal to specific caste groups.

Together, these perspectives highlight that caste is not merely a social identity but a powerful political resource that shapes voter preferences, party strategies, and electoral outcomes. The persistence of caste-based voting underscores its continued relevance in structuring political competition in India.

While caste has historically been a dominant determinant of voting behaviour, recent scholarship suggests that electoral choices in India are increasingly influenced by a broader set of factors. One such factor is religion, which has gained prominence in political mobilization, particularly with the rise of majoritarian narratives and identity-based campaigns. Religious identity can intersect with political preferences, shaping voter alignments in ways that extend beyond caste considerations (Jaffrelot, 2007).

Leadership also plays a critical role in influencing voter behaviour. Charismatic leaders and strong party figures often transcend traditional identity boundaries, attracting support across diverse social groups. Studies of electoral politics in India have shown that leadership appeal, credibility, and perceived effectiveness can significantly impact voting decisions (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009).

Governance and development outcomes constitute another important determinant. Voters increasingly evaluate political parties based on their performance in delivering public goods, infrastructure, and economic growth. This shift towards performance-based voting is particularly evident in urban areas, where voters are more exposed to policy outcomes and administrative efficiency (Chandra, 2004).

Welfare politics has also emerged as a significant factor in shaping electoral preferences. Government schemes related to housing, food security, employment, and social protection influence voter perceptions and can generate electoral support, particularly among economically disadvantaged groups. These schemes often operate alongside identity-based politics, creating a complex interplay between material benefits and social identities.

Taken together, these factors indicate that voting behaviour in India is becoming increasingly multi-dimensional. While caste continues to matter, it now interacts with religion, leadership, governance, and welfare considerations, reflecting a more complex and dynamic electoral landscape.

Urban voting behaviour in India differs significantly from rural patterns, particularly in terms of the relative importance of identity and issue-based considerations. Urban electorates are characterized by greater social diversity, higher levels of mobility, and weaker traditional social networks, which can dilute the influence of caste-based identities. According to studies by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar, urban voters often display more fragmented and less predictable voting patterns compared to rural voters, where caste remains a stronger organizing principle (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009).

Research also suggests that urban voters are more likely to prioritise issues such as governance, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. Allison Berland Kaul finds that urban voters increasingly evaluate political choices based on development outcomes and party performance, alongside identity considerations (Kaul, 2013). The fragmentation of urban electorates and the growing importance of issue-based voting highlight the evolving nature of political behaviour in metropolitan contexts.

Research Gap

The existing literature on Indian electoral politics has extensively examined the role of caste in shaping voting behaviour and political mobilisation. Scholars such as Yadav (1999), Jaffrelot

(2003), and Chandra (2004) have demonstrated how caste identities structure electoral competition and party strategies. More recent scholarship has also highlighted the growing importance of governance, leadership, welfare politics, and religion in influencing electoral outcomes, particularly in urban settings.

However, much of this literature relies on large-scale survey data and macro-level electoral analyses. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how urban voters themselves perceive and prioritise these factors in their everyday political decision-making. Existing studies seldom explore whether caste continues to function as a direct determinant of voting behaviour in metropolitan contexts such as Mumbai, where migration, linguistic diversity, socio-economic inequalities, and rapid urbanisation reshape political identities.

Furthermore, there is a paucity of qualitative field-based studies that examine the interaction between traditional determinants such as caste and emerging concerns related to governance, development, regional identity, and local–migrant dynamics. By focusing on voters' own narratives and experiences, this study seeks to address this gap and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of urban electoral behaviour in contemporary India.

Data Analysis

Profile of Respondents

The findings of this study are based on primary data collected from 27 respondents across multiple neighbourhoods in Mumbai. The sample was designed to capture diversity across socio-economic backgrounds, residential contexts, and migration status. Respondents included both long-term Marathi-speaking residents and migrants from other states, reflecting the heterogeneous composition of Mumbai's urban electorate.

The respondents represented a range of age groups, occupations, and housing types, including residents of informal settlements, lower-middle-class neighbourhoods, and middle- to upper-middle-class residential areas. This diversity enabled the study to capture variations in voter perceptions across different social and economic strata.

In terms of migration background, the sample included individuals who were born and raised in Mumbai as well as those who had migrated from other parts of India and had been residing

in the city for varying durations. This distinction is particularly relevant given the role of migration in shaping urban political dynamics.

Overall, the sample provides a broad cross-section of urban voters in Mumbai, allowing for an exploration of how different social, economic, and demographic factors influence voting behaviour.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Location and Migration Background

Location	Total respondents	Marathi	Non - Marathi
Dharavi	4	0	4
Dadar	5	4	1
Chembur	5	3	2
Ghatkopar	5	4	1
Mulund	4	2	2
Goregaon	4	2	2
Total	27	15	12

The distribution of respondents across different locations and migration backgrounds is presented in Table 1.

Table 2: Key determinants of Voting behaviour

Factors	Number	Percentage
Development and Infrastructure	24	89%
Local issues, employment and welfare policies	9	33%
Party loyalty and ideology	6	20%

Candidate background and performance	2	7%
Total number of respondents	27	100%

As shown in Table 2, development emerges as the most significant factor influencing voting behaviour among respondents.

Factors Determining Voting Behaviour among Respondents

The analysis of respondent data indicates that development-related concerns overwhelmingly dominate urban voting behaviour in Mumbai. As shown in Table 2, 89 percent of respondents (24 out of 27) identified development of the city in terms of a better infrastructure as the most important factor influencing their voting decisions. This is significantly higher than other factors such as local issues (33 percent), party loyalty and ideology (20 percent), and candidate performance (7 percent).

This suggests a clear shift towards performance-based voting, where voters prioritise tangible outcomes such as infrastructure, housing, employment, and basic services over traditional identity markers. Respondents across different socio-economic backgrounds emphasised the importance of everyday governance issues. For instance, one respondent from Dadar noted, *“We vote for better infrastructure in the city, affordable education and housing”* (R12, Dadar). Similarly, a respondent from Dharavi highlighted the importance of basic civic amenities, stating, *“My concerns are good drainage and toilet facilities... if I see a candidate taking these up, I would vote for them.”* These responses illustrate that urban voters, particularly those in informal settlements, are driven by immediate and material concerns linked to quality of life.

At the same time, other factors continue to play a role, albeit to a lesser extent. A segment of respondents indicated that party ideology and loyalty influence their voting decisions, particularly in the context of state elections where party agendas and alliances become more salient. Additionally, a smaller proportion of respondents emphasised candidate-specific attributes, such as educational qualifications and criminal background, suggesting the presence of an informed voter base that evaluates candidates on credibility and competence.

Importantly, while development emerges as the dominant factor, identity considerations have not entirely disappeared. One respondent explicitly stated that *“my identity is important...*

securing the interests of my community is imperative.” This indicates that identity-based voting, though less prominent, continues to coexist with issue-based considerations.

Overall, the findings suggest that urban voting behaviour in Mumbai is increasingly shaped by developmental and governance concerns, reflecting a shift away from purely identity-driven politics. However, this shift is not absolute; rather, it represents a layering of new determinants over existing identity-based frameworks, resulting in a more complex and multi-dimensional pattern of electoral decision-making.

Identity and Regional Politics (Language and Local–Migrant Dynamics)

In addition to caste and religion, regional identity and language emerged as important factors shaping political perceptions among respondents. Several participants, particularly long-term Marathi-speaking residents, articulated a sense of cultural and political marginalisation within certain urban localities. One respondent from Goregaon, a vegetable vendor, described an incident where she felt socially excluded due to language barriers, noting that she “felt isolated in [her] own city when nobody spoke in [her] support.” She further connected this experience to electoral politics, arguing that in areas dominated by migrant communities, political parties tend to nominate candidates from those communities, leading to a perception of underrepresentation among local residents.

This perception reflects a broader “majoritarian logic” within urban constituencies, where numerical strength of specific linguistic or regional groups can influence both candidate selection and electoral outcomes. Another respondent reinforced this view, stating that “when it comes to electoral politics, numbers win,” suggesting that demographic concentration plays a significant role in shaping political representation in the city.

At the same time, respondents also distinguished between political representation and economic opportunity. While electoral outcomes were seen as influenced by community dominance, some respondents viewed access to employment as merit-based, indicating a more complex and nuanced understanding of urban competition. This suggests that regional identity in Mumbai operates not only as a cultural marker but also as a political and spatial factor influencing perceptions of representation and fairness.

The salience of regional and linguistic identity in urban electoral politics is further reflected in the performance of parties such as the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), which has

historically mobilised voters through “sons of the soil” rhetoric targeting migrant communities. Despite its limited overall electoral success, the party has managed to secure victories in select pockets of Mumbai, particularly in areas with a significant Marathi-speaking population. In the 2026 Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections, the MNS won a small number of seats (secured 3 out of 227), indicating that while it is not a dominant force, its appeal resonates in specific localities. Ward-level results show MNS candidates winning in parts of central Mumbai and the eastern suburbs, including wards such as F-South and G-South, which have historically been associated with Marathi working-class populations. (Maharashtra State Election Commission, 2026)

The electoral performance of the MNS suggests that identity-based mobilisation, particularly around language and regional belonging, continues to influence voting behaviour in certain urban constituencies. This is especially significant given that such mobilisation often occurs independently of governance performance or development outcomes. As noted during field interactions, some respondents expressed that demographic dominance of specific communities can shape both candidate selection and electoral outcomes, reinforcing the idea that “numbers win” in urban constituencies.

At the same time, the limited overall success of the MNS indicates that while regional identity politics persists, it operates alongside and is often secondary to other determinants such as development and governance. This highlights the layered nature of urban voting behaviour, where identity-based appeals coexist with performance-based considerations rather than completely replacing them.

Party loyalty and Ideology

Party loyalty emerged as a secondary but notable determinant of voting behaviour. A segment of respondents indicated a consistent preference for a particular political party irrespective of the individual candidate. This pattern was especially evident among respondents from Mulund, where three participants stated that they regularly vote for the same party, citing trust in party leadership and decision-making. As one respondent explained, their vote is guided by the belief that party leaders “will nominate the right candidates,” reflecting a reliance on party reputation rather than candidate-specific attributes.

This pattern was particularly evident among respondents from Mulund, where three participants reported consistently voting for the same party, specifically the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), citing trust in party leadership and decision-making.

Responses to a preliminary question further indicate that 15 respondents (56%) reported consistently voting for the same party or candidate, while 12 respondents (44%) stated that their choice varies depending on the candidate and context. This near-even split suggests that, although party loyalty exists among a segment of urban voters, a substantial proportion exhibit flexibility in electoral decision-making, evaluating candidates and issues rather than adhering strictly to party affiliation.

This suggests the presence of party-centric voting, where electoral choice is shaped by ideological alignment, leadership credibility, and organisational trust. While less dominant than development-related concerns, party loyalty appears to function as a stabilising factor in voting behaviour, particularly among voters with established political preferences.

Caste in Urban Voting Behaviour

Table 3: Influence of Caste in Urban Voting Behaviour

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
No role of caste in cities	17	63%
Plays an important role	7	26%
Maybe	3	11%
Total	27	100%

The role of caste in urban electoral politics presents a complex and nuanced picture. As shown in Table 3, a majority of respondents (17 out of 27) indicated that caste plays little to no role in influencing voting behaviour in cities like Mumbai. In contrast, a smaller proportion (7 respondents) believed that caste continues to play an important role, while a few (3 respondents) expressed uncertainty. This distribution suggests a perceptible shift away from caste as the dominant determinant of voting behaviour in urban contexts.

Several respondents explicitly articulated the declining relevance of caste in cities. For instance, a respondent residing in a chawl near Shivaji Park noted, “*We don’t even know what*

is the caste of the candidate... my concern lies in local issues, not caste.” Such responses indicate that urban voters, particularly in heterogeneous and densely populated environments, may prioritise everyday governance concerns over traditional identity markers.

However, the findings also reveal that caste has not entirely disappeared from urban political considerations. Some respondents emphasised its continued importance in ensuring representation and social security. As one respondent observed, *“Caste plays an important role... it gives a sense of security and representation.”* Another respondent offered a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that while caste may not directly determine individual voting decisions, it continues to shape expectations of representation, particularly at the local level. The respondent noted that having a representative from one’s community could facilitate access to local problem-solving mechanisms.

These findings suggest that caste in urban contexts operates less as a direct voting determinant and more as a latent or indirect factor, influencing perceptions of representation rather than explicit electoral choice.

Table 4: Caste Composition of Chief Ministers in Maharashtra

Chief Ministers	Tenure	Party	Caste
Yashwantrao Chavan	1960-62	INC	Maratha
Vasant Rao Naik	1963-75	INC	Kunbi
Shankarrao Chavan	1975-77, 1986-88	INC	Maratha
A.R Antulay	1980-82	INC	Muslim
Sharad Pawar	1978-80, 1988-91, 1993-95	INC, NCP	Maratha
Manohar Joshi	1995-99	Shiv Sena	Brahmin
Narayan Rane	1999	Shiv Sena	Maratha
Vilasrao Deshmukh	1999-2003, 2004-2008	INC	Maratha
Ashok Chavan	2008-2010	INC	Maratha
Prithviraj Chavan	2010-2014	INC	Maratha

Devendra Fadnavis	2014-2019, 2025-present	BJP	Brahmin
Uddhav Thackeray	2019-2022	Shiv Sena	CKP
Eknath Shinde	2022-2024	Shiv Sena (Shinde)	Maratha

Source: Author’s compilation based on publicly available data from government records and secondary sources.

This observation stands in contrast to the broader political landscape of Maharashtra, where caste has historically played a significant role in structuring political power. As illustrated in Table 4, a majority of Chief Ministers in Maharashtra have belonged to the Maratha community, reflecting the dominance of the Maratha-Kunbi caste bloc in state politics. This pattern highlights the continued relevance of caste in shaping political leadership at the macro level, even as its influence appears to be relatively attenuated at the level of individual voter behaviour in urban constituencies.

The contrast between state-level caste dominance and urban-level voter perceptions suggests that while caste remains embedded in political structures, its salience in shaping voter decision-making in cities like Mumbai may be diminishing. Instead, caste appears to coexist with other determinants such as development,

Table 5: Religion and Urban Voting Behaviour

Influence of Religious issues	Number of respondents
Yes	10
No	13
Maybe	4
Total	27

Religion and Urban Voting Behaviour

The role of religion in shaping urban voting behaviour presents a divided and nuanced pattern. As indicated in Table 5, 13 respondents reported that religious issues do not significantly influence politics in Mumbai, while 10 respondents believed that religion continues to play an

important role. A smaller number (4 respondents) expressed uncertainty. This distribution suggests that, unlike caste, religion remains a contested and context-dependent factor in urban electoral behaviour.

A section of respondents highlighted the growing salience of religious polarisation, particularly in the contemporary media environment. One respondent noted that religious divisions have “*amplified... due to social media and TV news channels,*” suggesting that political narratives are increasingly shaped by mediated forms of communication. This reflects the role of digital and mass media in constructing and reinforcing identity-based political discourse.

At the same time, several respondents rejected the idea that religion plays a dominant role in Mumbai’s electoral politics. As one respondent argued, “*communal politics is not relevant to Mumbai... there are pockets where fear and hatred are mobilised, but overall it does not influence votes.*” This perspective points to the localized nature of religious mobilisation, where its impact may be limited to specific constituencies rather than the city as a whole. The reference to Mumbai’s past experiences with terror attacks further suggests that while religion may have influenced voting behaviour at certain points in time, its relevance may be evolving.

Other respondents adopted a more balanced view, acknowledging that religion, like caste and regional identity, continues to influence some segments of the electorate. These responses indicate that religion operates as one among several identity markers, rather than as a singular or dominant determinant.

Overall, the findings suggest that religion occupies an intermediate position in urban voting behaviour. While it has not replaced caste as a structural force, neither has it disappeared. Instead, religion appears to function as a situational and context-specific factor, influencing electoral behaviour in certain pockets and among specific groups, while coexisting with other determinants such as development, governance, and leadership.

Leadership and Voting Behaviour

The influence of political leadership on voting behaviour presents a moderately significant but contested pattern among respondents. Out of 27 respondents, 16 respondents acknowledged that leadership plays an important role in shaping their voting decisions, while 11 respondents stated that it does not significantly influence their choices. This distribution suggests that

leadership is an important, though not universally dominant, determinant in urban electoral behaviour.

Several respondents emphasised that the importance of leadership varies across different levels of elections. One respondent noted that while local elections are often influenced by candidate performance, leadership becomes increasingly significant in state and national elections: *“People tend to vote for candidates who perform well in local elections, but for state elections leadership plays an important role, and even more for Lok Sabha elections.”* This distinction highlights a multi-level voting behaviour, where voters differentiate between local governance and broader political leadership.

Respondents also pointed to the strategic use of leadership by political parties, particularly in the context of national-level politics. As one participant observed, parties often leverage the popularity of national leaders during state elections, sometimes even in the absence of a declared chief ministerial candidate. This indicates that leadership can function as a symbolic and mobilizing force, shaping voter perceptions beyond immediate local concerns.

At the same time, some respondents expressed scepticism regarding the effectiveness of leadership-centric politics. One respondent argued that over-reliance on a single leader can lead to both credit and blame being concentrated on that individual, making electoral outcomes more volatile. This perspective underscores the continued importance of local leadership and grassroots connect, suggesting that voters may value accessibility and responsiveness alongside broader political appeal.

Overall, the findings indicate that leadership plays a context-dependent role in urban voting behaviour. While it is more influential in state and national elections, particularly through the projection of prominent leaders, it does not uniformly override other factors such as development, governance, and local candidate performance. Instead, leadership operates as one of several determinants, contributing to a layered and multi-dimensional pattern of electoral decision-making.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings of this study point to a hybrid pattern of urban voting behaviour in Mumbai, where material considerations and identity-based perceptions coexist. Across the sample of 27 respondents, development-related concerns emerged as the dominant determinant,

with a majority prioritising issues such as infrastructure, service delivery, housing, and employment. This pattern was particularly pronounced among middle-class respondents, who emphasised concerns such as transport delays, overcrowding, and administrative efficiency. In contrast, respondents from informal settlements focused on localised governance issues, including drainage, sanitation, and access to welfare, indicating that socio-economic position shapes the content of development priorities.

At the same time, the data suggests that identity has not disappeared, but operates in more selective and context-specific ways. While a majority of respondents indicated that caste plays a limited role in urban elections, and opinions on religion were divided, regional and linguistic identity emerged as a secondary but notable theme. A small segment of long-term Marathi-speaking respondents expressed concerns related to language and perceived competition over employment and representation, reflecting an undercurrent of local–migrant tension within the urban electorate.

The analysis of party preference further reinforces the non-uniform nature of urban voting behaviour. A near-even split was observed between respondents who consistently support the same party (56%) and those whose choices vary (44%). This suggests that urban voters are neither fully party-bound nor entirely fluid; rather, they adopt a selective approach, combining party preference with candidate evaluation and issue-based considerations.

Leadership also plays a context-dependent role, with respondents indicating that it is more influential in state and national elections than in local contests. This points to a differentiated voting logic, where local elections are driven by performance and accessibility, while higher-level elections are shaped by leadership appeal and broader political narratives.

Taken together, these findings indicate that urban voting behaviour in Mumbai is best understood as a layered and multi-dimensional process. Development functions as the primary driver of electoral choice, but it is accompanied by secondary influences, including party loyalty, leadership, and selective forms of identity politics, particularly regional sentiments among sections of the native population. Rather than a complete departure from identity-based voting, the evidence suggests a reconfiguration of political

priorities, where material concerns dominate but identity continues to operate in the background.

Discussion

This study set out to examine the determinants of urban voting behaviour in Mumbai and assess whether caste continues to play a central role in shaping electoral choices. The findings indicate a significant shift in the relative importance of caste, suggesting that while it remains embedded in the broader political structure, its direct influence on urban voting behaviour appears to be limited.

Existing scholarship has long emphasised the centrality of caste in Indian electoral politics (Jaffrelot, 2003; Yadav, 1999). Caste has historically functioned as a key axis of political mobilisation, shaping both voter alignments and party strategies. However, the findings of this study resonate with Kaul's (2013) argument that urban voters increasingly evaluate political choices based on governance, development, and party performance alongside identity considerations. Similarly, Yadav and Palshikar (2009) argue that urban electorates display more fragmented and issue-based voting patterns compared to rural areas. The present study provides qualitative evidence supporting these observations in the context of Mumbai. A majority of respondents indicated that caste does not play a significant role in their voting decisions, instead prioritising factors such as development, governance, and service delivery. These findings suggest that urbanisation may weaken the influence of traditional social structures and encourage more issue-based forms of political participation.

At the same time, the study does not support the conclusion that identity politics has disappeared. Rather, it has been reconfigured. While caste appears to have diminished in direct electoral decision-making, other forms of identity, particularly religion and regional belonging continue to influence voter perceptions, albeit in more limited and context-specific ways. The findings on religion, for instance, reveal a divided electorate, with some respondents acknowledging its influence while others reject its relevance in the urban context. This suggests that religious mobilisation operates unevenly, often confined to specific political contexts or localities.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the emergence of regional and linguistic identity, particularly among sections of the native Marathi-speaking population. Concerns regarding migration, employment opportunities, and political representation indicate that urban

identity politics may be shifting from caste-based mobilisation to forms of “sons of the soil” politics. This aligns with broader patterns observed in Maharashtra’s political history, where regional identity has periodically been mobilised in response to demographic and economic changes. However, in the present study, such sentiments were not dominant but rather constituted a secondary layer of political perception, coexisting with development-oriented concerns.

The findings also highlight the importance of development as the primary determinant of voting behaviour. Across socio-economic groups, respondents consistently emphasised issues such as infrastructure, housing, and service delivery. However, the nature of these concerns varied across classes, with middle-class respondents focusing on efficiency and urban infrastructure, while respondents from informal settlements prioritised basic amenities and welfare. This indicates that urban voting behaviour is not only shifting away from identity-based determinants but is also stratified along socio-economic lines.

Furthermore, the role of political parties and leadership adds another layer of complexity. The near-equal split between respondents who consistently support the same party and those who vary their choices suggests that urban voters are neither fully loyal nor entirely fluid. Instead, they engage in selective voting, combining party preference with candidate evaluation and issue-based considerations. Similarly, leadership was found to be more influential in state and national elections than at the local level, indicating that voters differentiate between levels of governance when making electoral decisions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that urban voting behaviour in Mumbai is best understood as a multi-dimensional and layered process, where development serves as the primary driver, while identity, party loyalty, and leadership function as secondary and context-dependent influences. Rather than a complete departure from caste-based politics, the study points to a transformation in the hierarchy of determinants, with material concerns increasingly taking precedence in urban contexts.

These findings contribute to the broader literature on Indian electoral politics by highlighting the need to move beyond singular explanations of voting behaviour. While caste remains an important structural factor, its role in shaping individual electoral choices in urban areas appears to be mediated by a range of other considerations. This underscores the importance of

examining voter perceptions at the micro level, particularly in rapidly urbanising contexts where traditional social structures are being reshaped.

The findings of this study also address an important gap in the existing literature. While previous scholarship has extensively examined caste and identity-based voting through large-scale surveys and electoral analyses, relatively little attention has been paid to how urban voters themselves perceive these determinants. By employing a qualitative approach and foregrounding voters' own narratives, this study demonstrates that urban electoral behaviour cannot be adequately explained through caste alone. Instead, it reveals a more complex interplay between development, governance, leadership, religion, and regional identity. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to understand the transformation of political behaviour in rapidly urbanising contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of urban voting behaviour in Mumbai, with a particular focus on assessing whether caste continues to influence electoral choices in a metropolitan context. The findings indicate that while caste remains an important structural feature of Indian politics, its direct influence on voting behaviour among urban voters appears to be limited. Instead, electoral decision-making in Mumbai is increasingly shaped by a combination of development-oriented concerns, leadership considerations, and context-specific identity factors.

A key finding of this study is the dominance of development and governance-related issues in shaping voter preferences. Across socio-economic groups, respondents consistently emphasised concerns such as infrastructure, service delivery, housing, and employment. However, the nature of these concerns varied, with middle-class respondents prioritising efficiency and urban infrastructure, while respondents from informal settlements focused on basic amenities and welfare. This highlights the role of socio-economic context in structuring voter priorities within the city.

At the same time, the study finds that identity politics has not disappeared but has undergone a process of reconfiguration. While caste appears to have diminished as a direct determinant of voting behaviour, other forms of identity particularly religion and regional belonging continue to influence voter perceptions in more limited and situational ways. The emergence of local–

migrant tensions and language-based concerns among sections of the native Marathi-speaking population suggests that urban identity politics may be shifting towards new axes of mobilisation, even as traditional caste-based alignments weaken.

The analysis also reveals that urban voters exhibit a hybrid pattern of electoral behaviour. The near-equal split between respondents who consistently support the same party and those who vary their choices indicates that voters are neither entirely loyal nor fully flexible. Instead, they engage in selective decision-making, balancing party preference, candidate evaluation, and issue-based considerations. Similarly, leadership was found to play a context-dependent role, being more influential in state and national elections than in local contests.

Taken together, these findings suggest that urban voting behaviour in Mumbai is best understood as a multi-dimensional and layered process, where development serves as the primary driver, while identity, party loyalty, and leadership function as secondary and interacting influences. Rather than signalling the end of identity-based politics, the study points to a transformation in the hierarchy of determinants, with material concerns increasingly taking precedence in urban contexts.

At the same time, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The study is based on a relatively small qualitative sample and does not seek to establish statistical generalisations. Rather, it aims to provide an exploratory understanding of how urban voters themselves perceive electoral politics and the factors shaping their political choices.

This study contributes to the literature on Indian electoral politics by highlighting the importance of examining voter perceptions at the micro level, particularly in rapidly urbanising settings. However, the findings are based on a limited qualitative sample and are therefore not generalisable. Future research could expand the scope of analysis by incorporating larger samples, comparative city-level studies, and mixed-method approaches to further explore the evolving dynamics of urban voting behaviour in India.

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Declarations

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Appendix A - Questionnaire

1. Age group

2. Are you a registered voter in Mumbai?

3. Where do you live in Mumbai?

4. Type of residence

Slum / Chawl

Apartment

Independent House

Other

5. Marathi/ Non Marathi

Marathi

Non-Marathi/ Migrant

6. Did you vote in the most recent election?

Yes

No

7. Do you usually vote for the same party or candidate, or does it change across elections?

Same party

Same candidate

It varies

8. What factors matter most to you when deciding whom to vote for?

9. Do you think caste still plays a role in urban elections? Why or why not?

10. Compared to earlier elections, do you think the importance of caste in politics has changed in cities like Mumbai?

11. Which election are you thinking about while answering these questions?

Maharashtra Assembly Elections

Lok Sabha Elections
Municipal Elections
All elections generally

12. When you hear political speeches or campaigns, which issues are emphasized the most?

Development and governance
Religion or cultural identity
Welfare schemes
Local issues (roads, housing, services)
Leadership or personality
Other (specify)

13. How important are development issues (such as roads, housing, employment, public services) when deciding whom to vote for?

Important
Neutral
Not important

**14. Does the popularity or image of a political leader influence your voting decision?
Why or why not?**

15. Do you think religious issues influence politics in the city today?

16. What do you expect most from political representatives in Mumbai?