



The Impact of Political Polarization on Electoral Participation in India: A Comparative Analysis of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

Kamal

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, New Delhi

Mail Id: - kamalsharma9555@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Political polarization has become a significant feature of contemporary Indian politics, influencing electoral competition, voter behaviour, and patterns of political participation. In democratic systems, polarization can strengthen political engagement by increasing ideological awareness, mobilizing voters, and intensifying electoral competition. However, excessive polarization may also create social divisions, increase political hostility, and challenge the principles of inclusive democratic participation. This study examines the impact of political polarization on electoral participation in India through a comparative analysis of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

The study explores how ideological divisions, identity-based politics, leadership narratives, and digital campaigning have shaped voter mobilization and electoral behaviour during these elections. The 2014 election marked a major transformation in Indian politics with the rise of a strong national-level political narrative, while the 2019 election witnessed intensified polarization around nationalism, security, and governance. The 2024 election reflected a more competitive political environment, where ideological debates, social identities, welfare issues, and democratic concerns influenced voter choices.

The findings suggest that political polarization has contributed to increased electoral awareness, stronger political participation, and higher levels of voter mobilization. At the same time, growing ideological divisions have created challenges related to political intolerance, misinformation, and social fragmentation. The study concludes that political polarization plays a dual role in Indian democracy: it can encourage participation by creating political engagement, but excessive polarization may weaken democratic dialogue and social cohesion. Therefore, maintaining a balance between political competition and inclusive democratic values remains essential for the future of electoral participation in India.

Keywords: Political Polarization, Electoral Participation, Lok Sabha Elections, Voting Behaviour, Ideological Division, Indian Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, political polarization has emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping democratic politics across the world. It refers to the increasing division of political opinions, identities, and ideologies into opposing groups, often resulting in intense competition between political actors and their supporters. In democratic societies, polarization can have both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, it can increase political awareness, strengthen voter engagement, and encourage citizens to participate actively in electoral



processes. On the other hand, excessive polarization may deepen social divisions, promote political intolerance, and weaken constructive democratic debate.

India, as the world's largest democracy, has witnessed significant changes in its political landscape, particularly after the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The expansion of ideological competition, the rise of identity-based politics, increasing influence of social media, and the emergence of strong political narratives have transformed the nature of electoral participation. Political parties increasingly use ideological appeals, nationalism, welfare narratives, and social identities to mobilize voters and create electoral support. These developments have made political polarization an important factor in understanding voting behaviour and democratic participation in India.

Electoral participation is a fundamental indicator of democratic health, reflecting citizens' involvement in political decision-making. Voter turnout, campaign participation, political discussions, and engagement with political movements are influenced by various social, economic, and ideological factors. Political polarization can increase participation by creating stronger political identification and motivating citizens to support competing political visions. However, it may also discourage participation among groups who feel excluded from highly polarized political environments or may contribute to political conflicts that affect democratic stability.

The 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections provide an important framework for examining the relationship between political polarization and electoral participation in India. The 2014 election represented a major political shift with the emergence of a strong leadership-based campaign and a national development narrative. It witnessed increased voter enthusiasm and the consolidation of ideological competition between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and opposition parties. The 2019 election further intensified political polarization, with national security, nationalism, welfare policies, and leadership debates becoming central themes of electoral mobilization. The 2024 election reflected a more competitive political environment, where ideological divisions, social identities, constitutional debates, and governance issues shaped electoral choices.

This study aims to analyze the impact of political polarization on electoral participation in India by comparing the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. It examines how ideological divisions influence voter mobilization, electoral behaviour, and political engagement. The study also explores the role of digital media, identity politics, and political narratives in shaping contemporary electoral participation.

The significance of this research lies in understanding the changing nature of Indian democracy in an era of increasing ideological competition. While polarization can strengthen democratic participation by encouraging political involvement, excessive divisions may create challenges for social harmony and democratic dialogue. Therefore, analyzing the relationship between political polarization and electoral participation is essential for understanding the future trajectory of Indian electoral politics.



2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Political polarization and electoral participation are closely interconnected concepts in the study of democratic politics. Political polarization refers to the process through which political opinions, identities, and ideological positions become increasingly divided between opposing groups. It occurs when political actors and citizens move away from moderate positions and develop stronger attachments to competing ideological viewpoints. In democratic systems, polarization is often reflected through differences in political values, policy preferences, social identities, and competing visions of governance.

Political polarization can be broadly classified into two forms: ideological polarization and social polarization. Ideological polarization refers to differences between political groups based on policy choices, economic approaches, governance models, and national priorities. Social polarization occurs when political divisions become connected with social identities such as religion, caste, ethnicity, language, or regional belonging. In the Indian context, both forms of polarization influence electoral behaviour, as political parties often combine ideological positions with identity-based appeals to mobilize voters.

Electoral participation refers to the involvement of citizens in the political process, particularly through voting, election campaigns, political discussions, and other forms of civic engagement. Voter turnout is one of the most visible indicators of political participation, as it reflects citizens' willingness to take part in democratic decision-making. However, participation also includes activities such as attending political meetings, engaging with political content on digital platforms, and participating in public debates.

The relationship between political polarization and electoral participation is complex. Political polarization can increase participation by creating stronger political identities and generating greater interest in elections. When citizens perceive elections as a competition between fundamentally different political alternatives, they are more likely to engage actively in the political process. Strong ideological differences often encourage political parties to intensify campaigns, mobilize supporters, and increase voter awareness.

In India, electoral polarization has frequently contributed to greater political mobilization. Political parties use ideological narratives, leadership appeals, welfare promises, and identity-based issues to connect with voters. The rise of digital platforms has further strengthened this process by enabling rapid political communication, online campaigns, and direct engagement between political leaders and citizens. As a result, elections have become more participatory and politically intense.

However, excessive polarization may also have negative consequences for democratic participation. Extreme ideological divisions can reduce tolerance for opposing viewpoints, increase social tensions, and create hostile political environments. The dominance of identity-based narratives may shift attention away from policy debates and encourage voting based on social divisions rather than broader public interests. Additionally, misinformation and emotionally charged political campaigns on digital platforms can influence voter behaviour and weaken informed participation.



The Indian electoral experience, particularly during the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, demonstrates this dual nature of polarization. While ideological competition has encouraged voter mobilization and increased political engagement, it has also raised concerns regarding social divisions, political discourse, and democratic inclusiveness.

Therefore, political polarization should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that can both strengthen and challenge democratic participation. Its impact depends on whether political competition remains within the boundaries of democratic debate or develops into extreme division and exclusion.

3. EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN INDIA

The evolution of political polarization in India reflects the changing nature of electoral competition, social identities, and ideological conflicts within the country's democratic framework. Since independence, Indian politics has experienced different phases of political competition, ranging from one-party dominance to intense multi-party contests. Over time, ideological differences, identity-based mobilization, and changing social demands have contributed to the growth of political polarization.

During the early decades after independence, Indian politics was largely dominated by the Indian National Congress, which represented a broad coalition of social groups and ideological positions. Although political disagreements existed, the dominance of a single party limited intense ideological competition at the national level. The decline of Congress dominance after the 1960s and the emergence of regional parties gradually transformed the political landscape, creating greater competition among political actors.

The period after the 1980s marked a significant rise in identity-based political mobilization. Issues related to caste, religion, and regional identity became increasingly important in electoral politics. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations strengthened caste-based political mobilization, particularly among Other Backward Classes (OBCs), while debates surrounding religion and national identity became central to political discussions. These developments contributed to new forms of social and ideological polarization in Indian politics.

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a major national political force further intensified ideological competition. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement and debates surrounding secularism, nationalism, and cultural identity created a new political divide between competing ideological perspectives. Political competition increasingly involved contrasting views on national identity, governance, and the role of religion in public life.

The 2014 Lok Sabha election represented a major turning point in Indian politics. The election witnessed the emergence of a strong leadership-centred campaign and a shift toward national-level ideological competition. Issues such as development, governance, nationalism, and corruption became central themes of political debate. The BJP's electoral success marked a new phase where political narratives, social media campaigns, and strong ideological identification played an important role in voter mobilization.

Between 2014 and 2024, political polarization in India became more visible due to the expansion of digital media, increased political communication, and intense competition



between ruling and opposition parties. Social media platforms became important spaces for political discussion, campaign strategies, and ideological mobilization. At the same time, debates related to religion, citizenship, nationalism, welfare policies, and democratic institutions contributed to sharper political divisions.

The 2019 Lok Sabha election further strengthened polarization through narratives related to national security, leadership, and nationalism. The 2024 election continued this trend but also introduced new dimensions, including debates on welfare delivery, constitutional issues, economic concerns, and opposition unity. The increasing role of alliances and competing political narratives reflected the complexity of contemporary political divisions.

Overall, the evolution of political polarization in India demonstrates a shift from traditional party competition toward a more identity-driven and ideology-based electoral environment. While polarization has increased political awareness and participation, it has also created challenges related to social cohesion, democratic dialogue, and inclusive political engagement.

4. POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE 2014 LOK SABHA ELECTION

The 2014 Lok Sabha election marked a significant transformation in Indian electoral politics and represented a major phase in the development of political polarization. The election was characterized by intense competition between the ruling Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The political discourse during this election was shaped by contrasting narratives of governance, development, leadership, corruption, and national identity, resulting in increased ideological engagement among voters.

A central feature of the 2014 election was the emergence of a strong leadership-oriented campaign around Narendra Modi and the BJP. The campaign emphasized themes of economic development, good governance, administrative efficiency, and a promise of political change after a decade of UPA rule. The BJP presented itself as an alternative model of governance, while opposition parties criticized the party's ideological approach and raised concerns regarding issues of social harmony and inclusiveness. This competition created a strong ideological divide that influenced voter preferences and political participation.

The election also witnessed the increasing importance of nationalism and identity-based political narratives. While development and economic growth remained major campaign themes, debates regarding national identity, secularism, and cultural issues contributed to political polarization. Political parties used different ideological frameworks to mobilize supporters, encouraging citizens to participate actively in the electoral process. The combination of leadership appeal, ideological differences, and public dissatisfaction with the existing government contributed to a highly competitive electoral environment.

The role of social media and digital communication was another important factor in the 2014 election. Political campaigns increasingly moved beyond traditional rallies and print media to online platforms, allowing parties to directly communicate with voters. The extensive use of social media helped in spreading political messages, organizing supporters, and creating greater engagement, particularly among young voters. Digital campaigning became an important tool



for political mobilization and contributed to the changing nature of electoral participation in India.

The impact of polarization was also reflected in voter turnout. The 2014 Lok Sabha election recorded a turnout of approximately 66.4%, one of the highest levels of participation in a general election at that time. The strong political competition, anti-incumbency sentiment, and ideological mobilization encouraged greater voter involvement. Citizens perceived the election as a significant choice between different political visions, which increased electoral enthusiasm.

However, the polarization of political discourse also generated concerns regarding social divisions and the increasing focus on identity-based issues. While it strengthened political participation by motivating citizens and increasing electoral awareness, it also raised questions about the quality of democratic debate and the possibility of excluding alternative perspectives. Overall, the 2014 Lok Sabha election demonstrated how political polarization can act as a powerful force for electoral mobilization. The combination of ideological competition, leadership-based politics, and digital campaigning transformed voter engagement and established a new pattern of political participation that continued in subsequent elections.

5. POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE 2019 LOK SABHA ELECTION

The 2019 Lok Sabha election represented a further intensification of political polarization in India, with ideological differences becoming more prominent in electoral debates and voter mobilization strategies. Following the political transformation initiated in 2014, the 2019 election was shaped by competing narratives related to nationalism, national security, governance, welfare policies, and leadership. The election witnessed a strong contest between the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and opposition parties, particularly the Indian National Congress, creating a highly competitive political environment.

One of the most significant factors influencing the 2019 election was the centrality of nationalism and national security in political discourse. The Pulwama terror attack and the Balakot air strikes became major issues during the election campaign, with the ruling party emphasizing national security, strong leadership, and protection of national interests. The opposition focused on issues such as economic concerns, unemployment, institutional accountability, and social welfare. These contrasting narratives contributed to ideological polarization and shaped voter perceptions regarding leadership and national priorities.

The 2019 election also demonstrated the growing importance of welfare politics as a tool of political mobilization. Government initiatives related to housing, sanitation, financial inclusion, health insurance, and direct benefit schemes became important elements of electoral communication. The BJP emphasized its governance record and welfare delivery mechanisms to consolidate support among various social groups. At the same time, opposition parties presented alternative perspectives on economic development, employment, and social justice. The competition between these narratives strengthened political engagement among voters.

Digital platforms played an even more influential role in the 2019 election compared to 2014. Social media, online campaigns, and digital communication became central tools for political parties to reach voters, particularly younger generations. Online platforms enabled faster



dissemination of political messages and increased citizen interaction with electoral debates. However, the widespread use of digital media also raised concerns regarding misinformation, polarized content, and the creation of politically divided online communities.

The effect of political polarization was reflected in voter participation. The 2019 Lok Sabha election recorded a voter turnout of approximately 67.4%, the highest participation level in a general election at that time. The intense ideological competition, strong leadership narratives, and emotionally significant political issues encouraged citizens to participate actively in the electoral process. Voters viewed the election as a major choice between competing political visions, increasing political awareness and engagement.

Despite its contribution to participation, the polarization of the 2019 election also created challenges for democratic discourse. Political debates increasingly became centred around identity, nationalism, and partisan divisions, sometimes reducing space for policy-based discussions. The growing intensity of political competition contributed to stronger political identification but also increased social and ideological tensions.

Overall, the 2019 Lok Sabha election highlights the dual impact of political polarization on electoral participation. It enhanced voter mobilization, strengthened political awareness, and increased engagement with democratic processes. However, it also demonstrated the need to balance political competition with inclusive dialogue, tolerance, and respect for diverse democratic perspectives.

6. POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THE 2024 LOK SABHA ELECTION

The 2024 Lok Sabha election represented a new phase in the evolution of political polarization in India. While the ideological divisions that became prominent after 2014 continued to influence electoral politics, the nature of polarization became more competitive and multidimensional. The election was characterized by a direct contest between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the opposition coalition, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). The political discourse focused on issues such as governance, welfare delivery, economic development, social identity, constitutional values, and the future direction of Indian democracy.

A major feature of the 2024 election was the shift from a largely one-sided political narrative toward a more competitive ideological environment. The ruling party emphasized its record of governance, welfare initiatives, national development, and leadership continuity. The opposition coalition focused on issues such as unemployment, economic inequality, institutional concerns, social justice, and protection of democratic values. These competing narratives created a sharper ideological divide and encouraged greater political discussion among citizens.

Identity politics continued to play an important role in shaping electoral behaviour. Issues related to religion, caste representation, regional interests, and social welfare influenced voter preferences across different states. Political parties attempted to build electoral support by addressing specific social groups while presenting broader national narratives. This combination of identity-based mobilization and ideological competition contributed to increased political awareness and voter engagement.



The role of digital media became even more significant in the 2024 election. Social media platforms, online campaigns, and digital communication strategies were widely used by political parties to influence public opinion and mobilize voters. Digital platforms provided opportunities for greater political participation, especially among young voters, by enabling access to political information and direct interaction with political campaigns. However, concerns regarding misinformation, manipulated content, and highly polarized online discussions also became prominent challenges.

The 2024 election also highlighted changing patterns of electoral participation. Although voter turnout was slightly lower compared to 2019, political engagement remained strong due to intense electoral competition and widespread public debate. Young voters, first-time voters, and digitally connected citizens played an increasingly important role in shaping political conversations. The election demonstrated that political participation is no longer limited to voting alone but also includes online discussions, political campaigns, and public expression through digital platforms.

At the same time, the increasing polarization of political discourse raised concerns regarding democratic dialogue and social cohesion. Strong ideological divisions can motivate citizens to participate, but excessive polarization may create hostility between political groups and reduce acceptance of alternative viewpoints. The use of emotional narratives and identity-based appeals also creates challenges for issue-based democratic discussions.

Overall, the 2024 Lok Sabha election illustrates the evolving nature of political polarization in India. Unlike earlier elections where polarization was primarily shaped by a dominant political narrative, 2024 reflected a more competitive and contested political environment. It demonstrates that polarization can strengthen electoral participation by increasing political awareness and mobilization, but maintaining democratic inclusiveness requires balancing ideological competition with constructive dialogue and respect for diverse perspectives.

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2014, 2019, AND 2024 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

The 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections represent three important phases in the development of political polarization and electoral participation in India. Although each election was shaped by different political circumstances, all three demonstrated the growing influence of ideological competition, leadership narratives, identity politics, and digital communication on voter behaviour. A comparative analysis helps understand how political polarization has evolved and influenced democratic participation over the past decade.

Aspect	2014 Lok Sabha Election	2019 Lok Sabha Election	2024 Lok Sabha Election
Major Political Context	Anti-incumbency against UPA government and demand for political change	Continuation of BJP-led governance with focus on nationalism and security	Competitive contest between NDA and INDIA alliance with focus on governance and democracy



Dominant Political Narrative	Development, good governance, leadership change, corruption issues	National security, nationalism, welfare schemes, strong leadership	Welfare delivery, economic concerns, social justice, constitutional values, governance
Nature of Polarization	Emerging ideological division between BJP and opposition	Intensified polarization around nationalism, leadership, and identity issues	More competitive polarization involving ideology, social groups, and democratic concerns
Role of Social Media	Expansion of digital campaigning and online political communication	Strong influence through political messaging and voter mobilization	Highly developed digital campaigns with increased influence on public opinion
Key Mobilization Factors	Leadership appeal, development agenda, anti-incumbency sentiment	National security, welfare programmes, leadership image	Alliance politics, welfare issues, identity debates, youth engagement
Voter Participation	Approximately 66.4% turnout, reflecting strong political enthusiasm	Approximately 67.4% turnout, highest participation in a general election at that time	Approximately 66.1% turnout, with continued high political engagement

The 2014 election marked the beginning of a new phase in Indian politics, where political polarization became closely connected with leadership-based campaigns and national development narratives. The strong competition between the BJP and opposition parties encouraged greater voter awareness and participation. The election demonstrated how ideological differences and dissatisfaction with existing governance could generate significant electoral mobilization.

The 2019 election further strengthened political polarization by introducing stronger national security and identity-based narratives into electoral debates. The political competition became more intense, with voters increasingly identifying with competing ideological positions. The combination of nationalism, welfare politics, and digital campaigning contributed to increased political engagement and the highest voter turnout among the three elections.

The 2024 election reflected a more complex form of polarization. Unlike 2014, when one dominant political narrative shaped the election, and 2019, when nationalism became central, 2024 involved multiple competing themes including welfare performance, economic issues, social justice, constitutional debates, and alliance politics. Political participation remained strong, although the nature of engagement became more diverse due to the influence of digital platforms and changing voter expectations.



Overall, the comparative analysis shows that political polarization has played a significant role in shaping electoral participation in India. It has encouraged citizens to engage more actively by creating stronger political identities and increasing interest in elections. However, it has also created challenges related to social divisions, misinformation, and declining space for moderate political discussions. The experience of these three elections suggests that polarization can strengthen democracy when it promotes participation and debate, but it requires institutional safeguards to prevent exclusion and political intolerance.

8. CONCLUSION

Political polarization has become a defining feature of contemporary Indian electoral politics, significantly influencing patterns of political participation and voter behaviour. This study examined the relationship between political polarization and electoral participation through a comparative analysis of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The analysis demonstrates that ideological divisions, leadership narratives, identity-based politics, welfare debates, and digital communication have played important roles in shaping electoral engagement in India.

The 2014 Lok Sabha election marked a major transformation in Indian politics, where political polarization emerged around themes of development, governance, leadership, and national change. The election witnessed increased voter enthusiasm as citizens perceived it as a choice between competing visions of governance. The rise of digital campaigning and strong political narratives contributed to greater political awareness and participation. The 2019 election further intensified polarization, with nationalism, national security, welfare schemes, and leadership becoming central issues. These factors encouraged higher voter mobilization and strengthened political identification among citizens.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election reflected a more complex and competitive form of polarization. While ideological differences continued to influence voter choices, the election incorporated broader debates related to welfare delivery, economic challenges, social justice, constitutional values, and alliance politics. The changing nature of polarization indicates that Indian electoral participation is increasingly shaped by multiple factors rather than a single dominant political issue.

The study finds that political polarization has a dual impact on electoral participation. On the positive side, it increases political awareness, strengthens voter motivation, encourages public debate, and enhances citizen involvement in democratic processes. Strong ideological competition often motivates individuals to participate because they perceive elections as significant decisions about the future direction of governance. Political parties also use polarization as a mechanism for mobilizing supporters and increasing electoral engagement. However, excessive polarization creates several challenges for democratic functioning. Intense ideological divisions can increase political hostility, reduce tolerance for opposing viewpoints, and shift attention away from policy-based discussions. The expansion of digital media has further strengthened political participation but has also contributed to misinformation, online conflicts, and the creation of highly divided political communities. Therefore, while



polarization can encourage participation, uncontrolled polarization may weaken democratic dialogue and social cohesion.

The experience of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 Lok Sabha elections highlights the need for balancing political competition with democratic values. Electoral participation should not only be measured through voter turnout but also through the quality of political engagement, informed decision-making, and respect for diverse perspectives. Political parties, institutions, and citizens must ensure that ideological differences contribute to democratic debate rather than social division.

In conclusion, political polarization is neither entirely harmful nor entirely beneficial for democracy. Its impact depends on how political competition is managed within democratic institutions. In India, polarization has contributed to increased electoral participation and political awareness, but sustaining a healthy democracy requires promoting inclusiveness, tolerance, and constructive political dialogue. The future of Indian democracy will depend on the ability to maintain a balance between competitive politics and the principles of democratic pluralism.

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