There are many facets of the recent state elections but the most important is the role of women in shaping India’s future destiny.

First, the mandate in the state elections has been the decisive mandate across almost all states. For example, for West Bengal, the number of seats where winning margin is between 50,000 to 1 lakh votes has increased 3.5 times between 2016 & 2021. The same has happened in Tamil Nadu also where the number of seats increased 6 times in the aforesaid vote margin category. In Assam also, this ratio increased by 2.5 times during the same period. However, there are no divergent trends in the case of Kerala and seat distribution as per vote margin is almost same in both 2016 and 2021.

Second, rising participation of women in India’s political arena is one of the most significant stories of the last decade. Women voters are now playing a significantly bigger role in elections than ever before. In the 2019 General Lok Sabha elections, female voter turnout rates was higher than males, which has been declining from 1971, when the gap was at 12%. The rise in women voter turnout is even more pronounced in State Assembly elections. In the 23 major States, where state assembly elections happened in last 5-years, women’s turnout was higher (more than 1%) than that of men in 15 States and marginally higher (0-0.5%) in 3 states. Interestingly, out of these 18 states, same Government was re-elected in 10 states. This represents an inflection point and finally resulting in a qualitative change in the gender underpinning of India’s democracy.

In this context, we believe that the Central Government should quickly push through the increase in marriage age for women. On social front, this will lead to lowering MMR as well as improvement of nutrition levels while on financial front opportunities will be opened for women to pursue higher education and careers. We believe increasing the legal age has the potential to reduce India’s MMR and will lead to more females doing graduation and hence coming into labour force. Another benefit is legal marriage age will become same for men and women. In a consultation paper of reform in family law in 2018, the Law Commission argued that having different legal standards “contributes to the stereotype that wives must be younger than their husbands”.

Interestingly, the mean marriage age in India is already above 21 years (i.e. 22.3 years) and any increase in marriage age will still be notional in nature as long as change of mindset of people does not happen regarding female education and marriage. 35% of females in India are married before the age of 21 years. Let us change our mindset towards a more just society. It should start from working place. At State Bank of India, women employees today head more than 3500 branches and representation of women in total workforce is 25.3%!

### Role of Publicity/Advertising in Elections

- There are plethora of factors that determine which candidate/party will win the elections like total voter turnout, women voter turnout, caste-based turnout, present leadership, incumbency, etc. The list is quite big. However, expenditure on publicity is one of them. Publicity or advertising includes advertising or marketing communications about a political party, representative or candidate, advertising about political issues or issues of public interest, and advertising in relation to Government policies. This type of communication is generally regarded as ‘election advertising’ where the material is intended or likely to affect voting in an upcoming election.

- We analysed information and publicity expenditure data (culled from State Budget documents) for ten states. We found out that in most of the states, on an average in order to re-elect in the elections incumbent Governments makes huge expenditure in the election year. The growth in information and publicity expenditure pre or post-election year is always less than the election year expenditure. However, in few states, where publicity expenditure was low in election year the incumbent Government mostly lost the election and didn’t get re-elected.
DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS ACCORDING TO VOTE MARGIN IN RECENT STATE ELECTIONS SHOW THE MANDATE HAS BEEN DECISIVE

- Vote margin is the difference between the number of votes cast for the winning candidate and the second-place candidate in an election. The vote margin pattern of recently concluded elections for four major states throw up interesting results. In the case of West Bengal, the number of seats where winning margin is between 50,000 to 1 lakh votes has increased from 12 in 2016 to 41 in 2021. The same has happened in Tamil Nadu also where the number of seats increased from merely 4 to 24 in the aforesaid vote margin category. In Tamil Nadu most of the candidates won with lower better margins this time. The number of seats in the margin of less than 20,000 declined from 171 in 2016 to 120 in 2021. In Assam also, 30 candidates won with a margin of more than 40,000 votes as compared to merely 12 in 2016. However, there are no divergent trends in the case of Kerala and seat distribution as per vote margin is almost same in both 2016 and 2021.

ROLE OF WOMEN VOTERS IN ELECTIONS

- Rising participation of women in India’s political arena is one of the most significant stories of the last decade. Women voters are now playing a significantly bigger role in elections than ever before. In the 2019 General Lok Sabha elections, female voter turnout rates was higher than males, which has been declining from 1991, when the gap was more than 10%. The gap was stagnant at around 8.4%, on an average for 4 elections between 1996 and 2004. Now the question arises, what is it that moves women voters most, and how are they shaping politics, policymaking, and the ideological divide?
  - The rise in women voter turnout is even more pronounced in State Assembly elections. Out of the 23-major States, where state assembly elections happened in last 5-years, indicate that women’s turnout was higher (more than 1%) than that of men in 15 States and marginal higher (0-0.5%) in 3 states. Interestingly, out of these 18 states, same Government was re-elected in 10 states, where women turnout was more than men turnout. This represents an inflection point and finally resulting in a qualitative change in the gender underpinning of India’s democracy. This speaks of social churn and it is not surprising that today political parties focus much more on women’s issues during their campaigns than ever before.
  - Party policies and campaigns are increasingly focusing on winning over women voters as never before. e.g. distribution of “free” gas cylinders in Uttar Pradesh, “free rice, Jewellery and, Cow to the poor” in Tamil Nadu, and “free bicycles, tablets for girls going to school/colleges in West Bengal, “free public transport” to women in many states.

Disclaimer:
The Ecowrap is not a priced publication of the Bank. The opinion expressed is of Research Team and not necessarily reflect those of the Bank or its subsidiaries. The contents can be reproduced with proper acknowledgement. The write-up on Economic & Financial Developments is based on information & data procured from various sources and no responsibility is accepted for the accuracy of facts and figures. The Bank or the Research Team assumes no liability if any person or entity relies on views, opinion or facts & figures finding in Ecowrap.

Contact Details:
Dr. Soumya Kanti Ghosh
Group Chief Economic Adviser
State Bank of India, Corporate Centre
Nariman Point, Mumbai - 400021
Email: soumya.ghosh@sbi.co.in
gcea.erd@sbi.co.in
Phone:022-22742440
:@kantisoumya