

## Does Urbanisation Matter? Determining The Political Behaviour of an Urban Voter<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Does urbanization matter in the Indian political context? Do levels of urbanization impact on the intensity of citizen participation in the electoral context? Can the geographical locality of a voter predict her political attitude? Yadav (2000) notes that till the 1970s, the urban voters were much more participatory and active than their rural counterparts. It is only after 1984, that the rural voter turnout increased and the difference between the two stood at six percentage points in 1998. Due to increasing urbanization across the country over the last two decades, the focus has shifted back to the urban areas and there is greater interest in understanding the voting patterns and behavior of urban citizens.

Very often, voting behavior in India is identified or understood in terms of the behavior of distinct groups based on - religion, caste, class and the like, which then become the functional basis for predicting the group's political behaviour<sup>3</sup>. However, a look at the contemporary literature on this topic (Deshpande 2004, Palshikar and Kumar 2004, Kumar 2009) shows that this might not always be the case and that socio-cultural dimensions including age, ethnicity and gender alone may not always be appropriate criterion to determine voting patterns of individuals. A citizen possesses all these

characteristics together at any given point of time. Thus, to predict political behaviour according to any one of these may not be wholly accurate. Similarly, the geographical location of the citizen is another characteristic that is often included in the above mentioned list. It is believed that voters in urban areas are more educated, more exposed to media and thus there is a possibility of a more nuanced perception about politics. They may also be considerably more active in politics and more engaged in political activities than those from rural areas.

However, there have been contesting views with regard to the urban voter and participation in political activities in recent times. On the one hand there is increasing talk of voter apathy (Kumar 2009, Shastri 2009) in the light of declining turnout rates for voting in urban areas and on the other one witnesses a massive participation of urban citizens from all walks of life in the mass mobilisation movements such as the Anna Hazare movement for the Jan Lokpal bill and the various other peoples' movements organized by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) over the past two years. Does this imply a disconnect from electoral politics and a continued (even contextual) interest in politics in the form of mainstream and protest movements?

With this backdrop, multiple questions arise with reference to the urban voter: Are the expectations of urban and rural voters from the state in any way different? Do they differ in their attitude and perceptions? How does all this affect their political/electoral participation? The two main questions that this paper seeks to explore are whether there is a difference in how urban and rural voters perceive the state/government (their attitude towards and expectations from the state); and does this translate into differences in the nature of their political participation? The paper attempts to answer these questions by dividing the analysis into four sections. The first section identifies variables used in the analysis. The next two sections analyse these variables to determine 'citizen perception of the state' and 'political engagement and participation levels of citizens towards the state'. To test whether citizen expectation leads to participation or not, a regression analysis is carried out in the fourth section. The paper concludes by highlighting the

<sup>1</sup> The earlier drafts of this paper received valuable inputs from colleagues at CERSSE, Jain University. I would like to thank Prof. Sandeep Shastri for providing critical suggestions and comments to carry the analysis forward. I take full responsibility for the interpretation and analysis of data in this paper.

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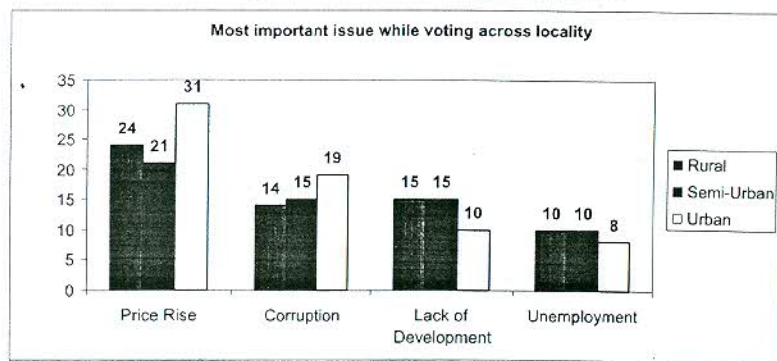
<sup>3</sup> Yogendra Yadav in his argument about the democratic upsurge in the 1990s talks about the increased political participation of the "socially underprivileged" communities (caste, gender, economic class etc.) as opposed to their counterparts.

main findings and observations. The National Election Study (NES) 2014 survey data has been drawn on for analysis<sup>4</sup> in this paper.

### Section I- Variables

The main variable that this paper examines is the locality of the respondent. According to the NES survey the sample respondents<sup>5</sup> distributed across localities were as follows- Villages- 66%, Towns (below 1 lakh population)- 16%, Cities (above 1 lakh population)- 11% and Metropolitan areas- 7%. For purpose of analysis we categorise the respondents into rural (village), semi-urban (towns) and urban (city and metropolitan) areas<sup>6</sup>. The two broad

Figure 1  
Most important issue while voting across locality



Source- Lokniti, CSDS NES 2014 post poll study; n- 17156, Don't Know/ Can't say not included in the analysis. All figures in percentage and rounded off. Data is weighted. Chi-Sq value is significant.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to thank Sanjay Kumar, Director CSDS and Co-Director- Lokniti, Delhi for allowing the use of NES data for this paper. The data was collected from 22301 respondents across India, in different phases during the months of April and May 2014 after the completion of elections in the respective states, and before the declaration of results.

<sup>5</sup> The representativeness of the NES sample mirrors the census data. For further details [www.lokniti.org](http://www.lokniti.org).

<sup>6</sup> Cities are included as urban areas because most of the state capitals of small and medium sized states fall in this category.

questions that the paper seeks to explore are differences between urban and rural respondents on their perceptions towards the state and return their political engagement levels<sup>7</sup>. 'Perception of state' by the voter was operationalised by the following variables- perception on issues considered while voting, perception on infrastructure and opinion about the country's and their own economic situation over the past five years. 'Participation' was operationalised by the following variables- whether the respondent voted or not, participation in election related activities and political literacy of the respondent. The next two sections will elaborate on each of these variables and the differences in opinions of rural, semi-urban and urban respondents.

### Section II- Perceptions Towards the State

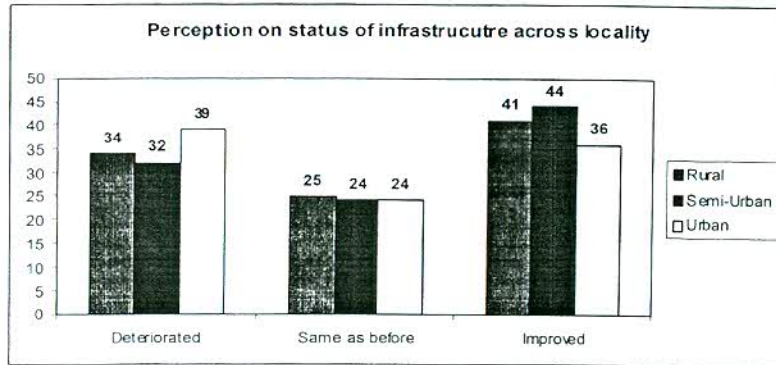
Given the nature of the Indian state and its socio-economic context, citizens would have varied expectations from the state and its administrative system. Data from the following variables tell us that on the basis of locality, respondents clearly differ from each other on what they expect from the state. All respondents were asked an open ended question as to what they considered to be the most important issue while voting in this election. As this was a vote for the new Lok Sabha, it provides a glimpse of what people hoped from the political system and those they voted to power. The top four issues which emerged were Price Rise (25%), Corruption/ Scams (15%), Lack of Development (14%) and Unemployment (10%).

Figure 1 shows that there is a clear divide among different localities over the issues they consider most important. For the urban voters, the more important issues are price rise (31%) and corruption (19%), whereas lack of development (15%) and unemployment (10%) seem to be more critical for the rural and semi-urban areas. It is interesting to note that the responses of the semi-urban voters are similar to those of the rural voters as both see lack of development and employment as the most critical problems.

<sup>7</sup> Since no direct questions were asked on these themes in the NES survey, certain variables from the questionnaire have been identified to quantify perception and participation

Figure 2

Perceptions on status of infrastructure across locality



Source: Lokniti, CSDS NES 2014 post poll study; n- 14353, Don't Know not included in the analysis. Chi-Sq value is significant. All figures in percentage and rounded off. Data is weighted. Chi-Sq value is significant.

The second variable of perception on infrastructure is constructed from a battery of questions which asked respondents to rate whether the government schools, railways and electricity supply had improved, remained same or deteriorated during the past five years. An index was created by combining the responses to all three questions. Figure 2 shows that though most of the respondents across all localities felt that infrastructure over the past five years has deteriorated, the semi-urban respondents (close to one third) are less skeptical as compared to their rural and urban counterparts. Similarly out of those who express the opinion that infrastructure has remained the same or improved semi-urban respondents seem to be more positive (one fourth and close to half respectively) than those in villages or large urban areas. The higher degree of optimism demonstrated by those in small towns and cities is a reflection of the mood in these regions. Many have argued in the past, that the small towns and cities are at the cusp of change (deSouza et.al. 2004).

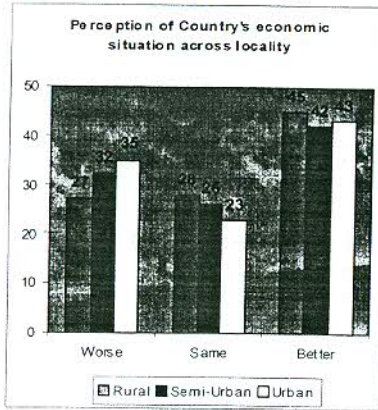
Figure 2 clearly shows that most of the respondents feel the status of infrastructure has improved over the past five years. However if we observe

across localities we see that among those who think infrastructure has deteriorated, the highest percentage is of the urban respondents (close to four of every ten), while among those who say improved, the lowest percentage is of urban respondents (a little over one third). It appears that the urban respondents are more skeptical than their counterparts and the semi-urban respondents though mostly mirroring the responses of their rural counterparts, are marginally more positive. The attitude of semi-urban respondents as analyzed earlier holds good here too.

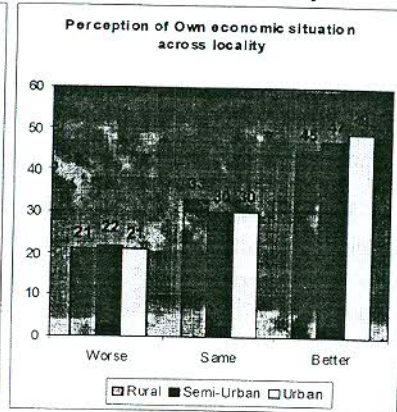
The next variable reflects on the respondents' perception of the country's economic condition, as well as their own economic position over the past five years. Two separate questions were asked to the respondents in this regard and their opinions are given in figures 3a and 3b. When we compare opinions on both economic situations we see that most of the respondents are of the opinion that the country's economic situation has improved, as well as their own situation has improved over the past five years. However it's interesting to note that the rural respondents are slightly more positive about the country's economic situation (45 percent) whereas the urban respondents are more positive about their own economic situation (close to half). Though the semi urban respondents do not display a divergent view from their fellow citizens at other locales, they are much more positive about improvement in their own economic situation (47%) over the past five years, than of the country's (42%), which is similar to the view of the urban respondents.

From figures 3a and 3b it is observed that there is definitely a difference in the way the urban and rural respondents view the state. The perceptions and expectations of urban respondents are distinctly different. Moreover the semi-urban respondents emerge as an interesting category. The issues that concern them most are similar to those of the rural respondents (figure 1) and they are more positive about the status of infrastructure provided by the government, again similar to the rural respondents (figure 2). However, they are more confident about improvement in their own economic condition over the past years, which is similar to the urban respondents. This could be linked to their rising aspirations (confident of

**Figure 3a**  
Perception of Country's Economic situation across locality



**Figure 3b**  
Perception of Own Economic situation across locality



Source : Lokniti, CSDS NES 2014 post poll study; For 3a- n- 20099; For 3b- n- 21268. Don't Know/ Can't say not included in the analysis. All figures in percentage and rounded off. Data is weighted. Chi-Sq value is significant.

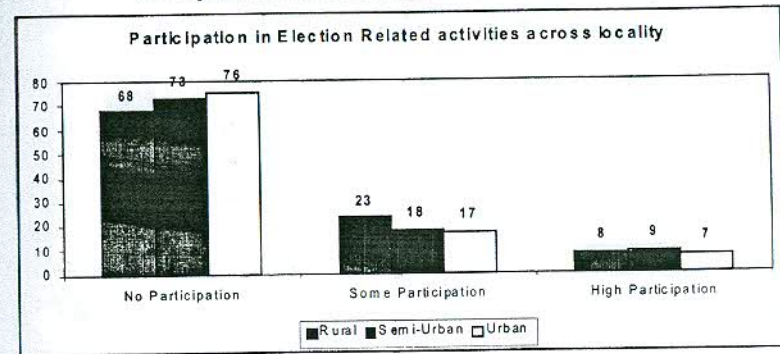
the future) and the ground reality (incremental improvement in conditions). In the case of the urban voter, the higher degree of skepticism could have been born out of their disillusionment with what goes in the name of the state.

In the following section we analyse the patterns of political engagement and participation of the citizens across localities.

### Section III- Participation and Political Engagement

Citizen participation in the affairs of the state can be assessed by different variables such as voting, participation in election related activities, how interested the citizen is in the affairs of the government, her level of political literacy etc. The three variables chosen to operationalise participation in this paper are- whether the respondent voted or not in the recent elections, whether the respondent participated in election related activities such as rallies, meetings, door-to-door campaigning and the like and the level of political literacy of the respondent. When asked whether the respondent

**Figure 4**  
Participation in Election Related activities across locality



Source : and rounded off. Data is weighted. Chi-Sq value is significant.

voted or not in the recently concluded general elections, as high as 91% respondents in the NES survey reported<sup>8</sup> to have voted. Across localities, there wasn't much difference in the reported figures. However, the rural respondents reported to have voted more (92%) than their semi-urban (90%) and urban (88%) counterparts. Even though the figures do not change drastically across locality, we observe that as we move towards urban areas, the voting percentage decreases.

The NES 2014 questionnaire asked a battery of questions to the voters about their participation in five election related activities<sup>9</sup>. These activities were combined and an index was constructed to measure no participation (did not participate in any activity), some participation (participated in one or two activities) and high participation (participated in three or more

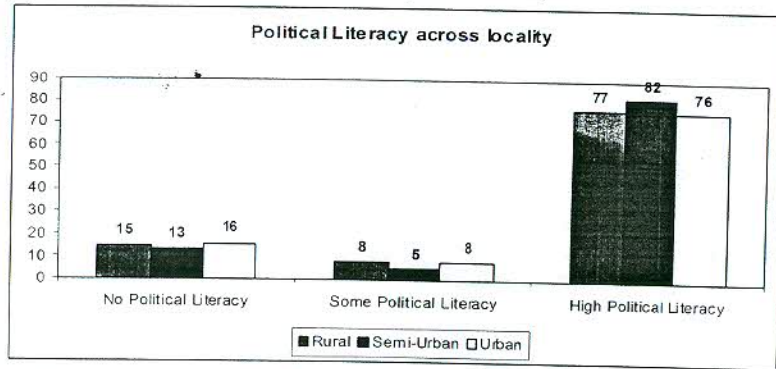
<sup>8</sup> As of 22nd may 2014, the Election Commission of India figures report 66.4% voting in the 2014 general elections, the highest ever.

<sup>9</sup> The election related activities that the respondents were asked about were- attended election meetings/ rallies, participated in processions/ nukkad nataks etc, participated in door-to-door canvassing, contributed or collected money, distributed election leaflets or put up posters.

Figure 5

## Political Literacy across locality

## Political Literacy across locality



Source : Lokniti, CSDS NES 2014 post poll study; n- 22301. Don't Know/ Can't say not included in the analysis. All figures in percentage and rounded off. Data is weighted. Chi-Sq value is significant.

activities). Figure 4 illustrates that as we move from rural to urban areas, participation in election related activities decreases. This pattern is similar to the figures reported for voting as well.

The third variable of political literacy is based on two questions asked to the respondents during the NES survey. The respondents were asked to name the party which leads the present government in the state as well as the name of their present chief minister<sup>10</sup>. Figure 5 illustrates that most of the respondents displayed high political literacy. Another interesting thing to note is that the urban and rural respondents were at similar levels of political literacy but the semi-urban respondents were the most politically literate (eight of every ten). During the analysis it was noted that the most number of 'don't know' answers came from the urban areas (one-sixth), followed by rural areas (one-seventh). Among the semi urban respondents about one

<sup>10</sup> The answers were categorized on the basis of correct and incorrect (don't know answers were also included in incorrect). Both variables were then combined and a political literacy index was created where if no correct answers were given it was termed as 'No political literacy', if one correct answer was given it was termed as 'some political literacy' and if both answers were correct it was termed as 'high political literacy'.

in very ten reported that they did not know the answer to the questions asked.

Hence, from the three variables analysed in this section we observe that political participation and engagement levels with the state are the lowest among the urban respondents. The semi urban respondents feature almost at a midpoint between their rural and urban counterparts. However among those who participate most in election related activities, the semi urban respondents appear on top. They also display a high level of political literacy and general awareness amongst respondents from all localities. In the next section regression analysis is carried out with some of the above mentioned variables to understand if the perception of the state, and the expectation that the respondents have from the state leads to their participation in political activities.

#### Section IV- Does Perception Lead to Participation?

While analyzing all the above variables it is noticed that locality plays a role in determining the attitude of the respondents. However, it remains to be seen whether despite locality, does perception of the state lead towards political participation by the respondent. If the respondent perceives the state to perform certain functions- such as provide basic infrastructure, a well functioning economy etc, and her expectation is fulfilled; does that encourage the respondent to participate in election related activities and engage more with the state? Thus the hypothesis that is being tested here is that greater expectation leads to more participation. For this purpose, a linear regression is carried out with the following variables- participation in election related activities is taken as the main dependent variable<sup>11</sup>. The

<sup>11</sup> Though the act of voting is the most obvious form of participation for a citizen, it is not taken as the main dependent variable because during the preliminary analysis it was found that voting is a one time activity which the citizens perceive more as an obligation than actual engagement with the state. Even if the respondent is not interested in politics, has very low levels of political literacy etc, she is most likely to go and vote on the day of election since the act of voting itself is seen as a moral duty. Other activities related to elections require more time and effort on the part of the citizen and therefore is taken as a more appropriate variable to test citizen engagement for this analysis.

Table 1

**Regression Analysis of Participation with Variables About Perception of the State**

Variables	Coefficients	Std. Error
Constant	0.325**	0.026
V1- Infrastructure Deteriorated	- 0.034*	0.014
V1- Infrastructure Same as Before	- 0.008	0.015
V2- Country's Economic Situation	0.026**	0.008
V3- Own Economic Situation	0.000	0.009
V4- Rural Locality	0.104**	0.015
V4- Semi-Urban Locality	0.042*	0.019

independent variables included in the analysis<sup>12</sup> are- perception on status of infrastructure, perception about country's economic condition and own economic condition over the past five years and locality as a control variable.

The regression analysis allows us to assess all the variables together and observe the effect of each variable while controlling for all the others. The first variable V1 depicts the perception of respondents on the status of infrastructure over the past five years. Those respondents who feel that the infrastructure has deteriorated over the past few years are less likely to participate in election related activities, with reference to those who feel infrastructure has improved, while controlling for locality. This variable shows a positive relation between perception and participation. The second part of this variable where respondents perceive that the infrastructure has remained the same as before, does not show a statistically significant result.

<sup>12</sup> In the regression model, the dependent variable of participation in election related activities is taken as a scale of no, some and high participation. Among the independent variables- Perception of status of infrastructure is included as a dummy variable (Deteriorated and same as before- where improvement of infrastructure is taken as a reference category). Perception about country's economic condition and own economic condition are also included as independent variables. The locality variable is also included as a dummy variable (Rural and Semi-urban- where urban is a reference category)

The second variable V2 where the respondents perceive an improvement in the country's economic situation over the past five years also shows a positive relation with participation. If the respondents feel that the country's economic situation has improved, they are more likely to engage with the state, controlling for locality of the respondent. The next variable about perception of the respondents' own economic situation does not show a statistically significant result in the regression analysis. Hence we can say that a positive perception of the country's economic progress enthruses citizens to participate more in political activities and engage with the state.

The next set of variables V4 are the controls that we have included in the analysis. We observe that with reference to the urban locality respondents, those living in rural and semi urban areas are more likely to participate and engage with the state, keeping all the other perception variables constant. This variable additionally illustrates that contrary to popular perception, urbanization itself does not lead to increased engagement with the state. There are other variables such as a positive perception about the state and its performance which also play a part in determining citizen engagement.

### Main Observations and Summing Up

The main focus of this paper was to understand if there is any difference in the opinions and attitudes of the urban respondents with reference to their semi-urban and rural counterparts. This difference was to be viewed from the lense of their perception of the state and also their levels of political engagement with the state in terms of participation in political activities and political literacy. The analysis in sections II and III shows that there is indeed a difference between the perceptions and expectations of the urban and rural respondents. Those residing in urban areas give more importance to issues of price rise and corruption whereas their counterparts view lack of development and unemployment as important issues. The status of infrastructure provided by the government is viewed in negative light by the urban respondents whereas the semi-urban respondents seem very positive about the improvement of state infrastructure. This clearly could be a function of expectation. We observe a negative trend with respect to urban locality

respondents when it comes to participation in political activities and engagement with the state. Even in the regression analysis we see that rural and semi-urban respondents participate much more than the urban ones. In the light of increasing digitization of electoral campaigns and enhanced use of social media for the purpose of propaganda during elections, it may be argued that the urban citizens find other avenues of engaging with the state and are not restricted by participation in election related activities (as mentioned in the questionnaire) alone to showcase their engagement<sup>13</sup>.

What emerges as the most interesting category in the whole analysis is the semi urban respondents. These respondents display perceptions and expectations from the state similar to their rural counterparts; expressing similar concerns about developmental and unemployment issues but at the same time are very positive about the status of government infrastructure and about their own improved economic situation. They also display a higher political participation and literacy than any of the other two categories. These respondents could potentially be the politically active and engaged citizens from emerging urban areas who could bring about a change in the commonly perceived apathetic political attitude of urban voters. The semi urban residents are the ones who experience the features of the rural and have had an opportunity to aspire for much of what is enjoyed by the urban as they may have frequent access to those areas.

However it is also possible that the rural and semi urban areas' political engagement is mostly due to their increased dependence on the state for resources and services and that as they move towards urbanization they may become less reliant on the state and hence appropriate lesser importance to state processes and their own participation in them. It is these newly emerging urban areas that need to be focused on by the state so that even if they become self-reliant, they do not shy away from participating in the political processes.

<sup>13</sup> In the Lokniti, CSDS NES 2014 post poll study it was found that 18% of urban respondents had high exposure to media (TV, radio, newspaper) as opposed to semi urban (15%) and rural (10%). Moreover moderate exposure to media was also highest amongst urban respondents (43%) followed by semi urban (37%) and rural (27%).

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