



THE RISE OF ISSUE-BASED POLITICS IN INDIA: A STUDY OF CHANGING POLITICAL PRIORITIES AMONG YOUNG VOTERS

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Abstract: Indian electoral politics has traditionally been analysed through the frameworks of caste, religion, region, political leadership and party identification. However, the increasing political importance of young voters has introduced a significant dimension to electoral behaviour: the growing salience of concrete public issues such as employment, inflation, education, economic opportunities, governance, welfare delivery, corruption and social security. This paper examines the rise of issue-based politics in India with particular reference to changing political priorities among young voters. The study is based exclusively on secondary data obtained from the Election Commission of India (ECI), Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), academic studies and other credible published sources available up to 2025.¹

The paper concludes that Indian politics is moving towards a more multidimensional form of electoral competition in which young voters increasingly expect political parties to address tangible problems affecting their everyday lives. The rise of issue-based politics therefore represents not the disappearance of identity politics, but the emergence of a more complex and performance-oriented political behaviour among younger citizens.

Key words: Issue-Based Politics, Young Voters, Youth Politics, Voting Behaviour, Unemployment, Inflation, Political Priorities, India, Lok Sabha Elections, Electoral Politics

1. Introduction

India is the world's largest electoral democracy, and elections constitute one of the most important mechanisms through which citizens participate in the political process. The character of Indian electoral politics, however, has never remained static. Since independence, voting behaviour has been influenced by caste, religion, region, class, language, political ideology, party loyalty, leadership and local social networks. In recent decades, economic performance, welfare programmes, governance, employment, inflation, education and public services have increasingly entered electoral debates. One of the most important developments in this transformation is the growing significance of young voters. India's large youth population gives younger citizens considerable potential to influence electoral outcomes and political agendas. Lokniti-CSDS has repeatedly identified youth as an important constituency whose aspirations extend beyond traditional political identities to questions of employment, education, economic security, lifestyle and political participation.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election provides an especially important context for examining this transformation. The Election Commission of India reported an overall voter turnout of 66.10 per cent in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, compared with 67.40 per cent in 2019 and 66.44 per cent in 2014. The total number of votes polled increased from 61.47 crore in 2019 to 64.64 crore in 2024. The political significance of the 2024 election lies not merely in turnout or electoral competition but also in the nature of the issues discussed



during the campaign. Unemployment, inflation, economic opportunity, welfare, farmers' concerns, development, corruption, social justice and questions of identity all occupied important positions in political discourse. A national Lokniti-CSDS pre-poll study found unemployment and price rise among the most important concerns of Indian voters.²

For young voters, these issues assume even greater importance because they directly affect their transition from education to employment, household formation, economic independence and social mobility. A 2024 Lokniti-CSDS study of young students in Delhi found that nearly four-fifths indicated that unemployment and inflation could affect their voting decision. When respondents were asked to identify the single most important issue shaping their vote, unemployment ranked first, followed by inflation, leadership and corruption.

from traditional identity-centred politics towards issue-based politics among young voters. The central argument is that Indian youth are not necessarily abandoning caste, religion, ideology or political leadership. Instead, these traditional factors increasingly interact with economic and governance-related concerns in determining political preferences.

2. Understanding Issue-Based Politics

Issue-based politics refers to a form of political competition in which voters evaluate political parties and candidates primarily on the basis of their positions, policies, performance and proposed solutions concerning specific public problems.

An issue-based voter may therefore ask questions such as:

- Which party can generate more employment?
- Which party can control inflation?
- Which party can improve education?
- Which government has performed better in delivering welfare?
- Which party can provide better public infrastructure?
- Which candidate has a credible programme for local development?
- Which political leadership can provide effective governance?

This approach differs from voting based predominantly on inherited political identity. Identity-based voting may involve caste, religion, community, region or family political affiliation, whereas issue-based voting places greater emphasis on policy preferences and perceived government performance.³

3. Young Voters and the Changing Indian Political Landscape

Young voters occupy a particularly important position in contemporary Indian politics because their political preferences are shaped by rapidly changing social and economic conditions. They are more exposed to higher education, digital media, employment competition, migration, entrepreneurship, global cultural influences and social media-based political communication.

The political interests of youth also reflect their life-cycle position. For a student or young graduate, employment and education may be more immediate political concerns than they are for an older voter. Similarly, housing, skill development, entrepreneurship, public examinations, recruitment, digital





opportunities and economic mobility can become politically significant. Lokniti-CSDS research demonstrates the importance of these concerns. Its youth research has consistently examined employment, career preferences, political participation and attitudes towards political issues. The 2023 youth study, based on 9,316 respondents across 18 states, reported unemployment as the leading concern among young Indians.

This suggests that young voters increasingly connect politics with their personal economic futures. Political parties therefore face pressure to translate broad electoral narratives into concrete programmes concerning employment, education, skills, entrepreneurship and economic security.

4. Major Issues Influencing Young Voters

4.1 Unemployment and Employment Opportunities

Employment is arguably the most important issue demonstrating the rise of issue-based politics among Indian youth. The 2023 Lokniti-CSDS youth study found that 36 per cent of young respondents identified unemployment as the country's most important problem. Poverty was identified by approximately 16 per cent and inflation by 13 per cent. The study also found that the proportion identifying unemployment as the most important problem had increased by 18 percentage points compared with the earlier 2016 youth study.

The issue is not merely psychological or electoral. It has a measurable economic foundation. According to the PLFS Annual Report 2025, the unemployment rate among youth aged 15–29 declined from 10.3 per cent in 2024 to 9.9 per cent in 2025. Urban youth unemployment nevertheless remained substantially higher than rural youth unemployment, at 13.6 per cent compared with 8.3 per cent.

Thus, although the labour-market situation showed improvement in 2025, employment remained an important structural concern for young citizens.⁴

4.2 Inflation and Cost of Living

Inflation represents another important issue because rising prices directly influence household purchasing power. Young people entering employment or living independently are particularly sensitive to the cost of education, accommodation, transportation, food and other essential goods.

The 2023 Lokniti-CSDS youth study placed inflation among the three most important problems identified by young respondents, with 13 per cent identifying it as the country's most important problem.

The 2024 Delhi youth survey similarly demonstrated the electoral relevance of inflation. Among 611 young students surveyed, inflation was identified as the second-most important issue influencing voting decisions after unemployment.⁵

4.3 Education and Skill Development

Education has traditionally been considered a social-sector issue, but among young voters it increasingly functions as an electoral issue directly connected with employment and social mobility. The 2024 Lokniti-CSDS survey of first-time voters in Delhi found that respondents identified political parties in different ways according to their perceived performance in youth-related areas. When asked which party was best at providing quality education, 40.7 per cent selected AAP and 39.8 per cent selected BJP in the Delhi-specific political context of the survey. This is important because it demonstrates that young respondents were capable of differentiating between political parties according to specific policy domains rather than evaluating parties solely as general political identities.



4.4 Development and Governance

Development remains a major component of contemporary electoral politics. Roads, infrastructure, digital connectivity, health facilities, sanitation, housing, electricity and welfare delivery are increasingly incorporated into political evaluations. The 2024 first-time voter survey found that development was the most frequently mentioned positive accomplishment of the Modi government, with 19.8 per cent of respondents selecting it. Protection of religious interests followed at 10.9 per cent, while good law and order was identified by 6.4 per cent. This indicates that development and governance can function as electoral issues alongside ideological and identity-based considerations.

5. Secondary Data Analysis

The present study does not employ primary fieldwork. It relies exclusively on secondary data collected and published by recognised institutions.

The principal sources include:

1. **Election Commission of India** – electoral statistics and Lok Sabha Election Atlas 2024.
2. **Lokniti-CSDS** – youth surveys and election-related studies.
3. **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** – employment and unemployment statistics.
4. **Academic research** published in *Studies in Indian Politics* and other scholarly sources.
5. Reputed newspapers and published analyses are used only to supplement institutional and academic sources.

The advantage of this approach is that it permits comparison across different datasets and time periods without claiming that the researcher independently surveyed voters.

6. Data Table I: Changing National Concerns among Indian Youth

Table 1: Major Problems Identified by Indian Youth

Major Issue	2016 (%)	2023 (%)	Change
Unemployment	18	36	+18 percentage points
Inflation/Price Rise	6	13	+7 percentage points
Poverty	—	16	—
Corruption	—	6	—
Education-related problems	—	4	—
Population-related problems	—	4	—

Source: Compiled from Lokniti-CSDS youth studies as reported in the 2023 youth survey analysis; 2023 survey covered 9,316 respondents across 18 states.

Interpretation

Table 1 demonstrates a substantial increase in the political salience of economic concerns among Indian youth. The proportion identifying unemployment as the most important national problem doubled from approximately 18 per cent in the earlier comparison point to 36 per cent in 2023. Similarly, the share identifying inflation increased from approximately 6 per cent to 13 per cent. This trend is significant from the





perspective of issue-based politics. Young people increasingly perceive national politics through the lens of economic opportunity and personal economic security. Unemployment is particularly significant because it connects education, skills, recruitment, entrepreneurship and future income. The data therefore suggest that economic issues are not simply campaign subjects created by political parties; they reflect substantive concerns among young citizens.⁶

7. Data Table II: Political Priorities of First-Time Voters

Table 2: Selected Political Attitudes of First-Time/Young Voters in Delhi, 2024

Indicator	Response (%)
Young people should follow what is happening in the country	91.9
Very interested in Indian politics	36.1
Somewhat interested in Indian politics	42.6
Unemployment identified as a disliked government performance	11.7
Price rise identified as a disliked government performance	14.7
Communalism identified as a disliked government performance	17.4
Very likely to vote in 2024 Lok Sabha election	52.9
Somewhat likely to vote	16.1
Voting as a citizen's duty	49.8*
Voting as a means of selecting the government	17.7*
Caste census should be conducted	48.2
Caste census unnecessary	46.2
Development identified as a liked government achievement	19.8
Quality education – BJP	39.8
Quality education – AAP	40.7
Employment generation – BJP	44.7
Employment generation – Congress	11.4
Youth problems – BJP	44.3
Youth problems – Congress	12.4

Valid percentage among respondents who indicated that they were very or somewhat likely to vote.

Source: Lokniti-CSDS, *Youth and Politics Survey 2024*, Delhi; N = 1,290.

Interpretation

Table 2 reveals a politically engaged young electorate. An overwhelming 91.9 per cent of respondents believed that young people should follow what is happening in the country. In addition, 78.7 per cent were either very interested or somewhat interested in Indian politics.





The data also reveal an important distinction between political interest and party preference. Young people may possess strong party preferences while simultaneously evaluating parties according to particular issues. For example, respondents differentiated political parties in relation to employment generation, youth problems and quality education.⁷

The findings also demonstrate that issue-based politics operates alongside identity-based and ideological politics. While development and employment were important, 67.1 per cent of respondents reported feeling very proud of the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya. At the same time, 48.4 per cent believed that the inauguration celebration was being conducted with the 2024 election in mind. Therefore, young voters cannot be described simply as either "issue voters" or "identity voters". Their political preferences reflect a combination of economic, developmental, ideological, cultural and leadership-related considerations.

8. Unemployment as an Electoral Issue among Urban Youth

The Lokniti-CSDS study of 611 young students in Delhi provides particularly strong evidence for the development of issue-based voting. The study found that 55 per cent of young respondents believed finding employment had become somewhat difficult during the previous two years, while another 25 per cent considered it very difficult. Approximately three-fifths, or 63 per cent, expressed a preference for government employment. Nearly half also expressed support for the idea of becoming job creators.

Most importantly, unemployment and inflation were reported as significant influences on voting decisions. When respondents were asked to identify the single most important issue affecting their vote, unemployment was selected by nearly two-fifths, followed by inflation at 23 per cent, leadership at 12 per cent and corruption at 9 per cent. This evidence is highly relevant to the present study because it directly links a substantive policy problem with electoral choice.

9. The 2024 Lok Sabha Election and the Youth Vote

The 2024 Lok Sabha election provides a useful case for understanding the changing political priorities of young voters. Sanjay Kumar and Devesh Kumar, analysing National Election Study data, argue that youth political behaviour in 2024 differed from the patterns observed in the 2014 and 2019 elections. Their study suggests that although political parties attempted to consolidate a youth constituency, no party was uniformly successful in attracting young voters on the basis of a single political narrative. This finding is important because it challenges the assumption that young voters constitute a homogeneous electoral bloc. Young voters differ by class, caste, gender, education, region, employment status, urbanisation and political socialisation.

Consequently, the "youth vote" should not be interpreted as a single political vote. Instead, it is more appropriate to speak of multiple youth electorates, each possessing different combinations of economic, social, cultural and political priorities.⁸

10. The Role of Digital Media

The growth of digital media has significantly altered the relationship between young citizens and politics. Young voters increasingly encounter political information through social media platforms, short videos, political commentary, influencers, digital news, online debates and messaging applications. This has reduced the distance between political actors and younger citizens. Digital platforms also allow specific issues to become politically visible very quickly. Employment examinations, recruitment controversies, educational



policies, inflation, corruption allegations, women's safety, environmental issues and welfare schemes can rapidly become subjects of online political discussion.

11. Issue-Based Politics versus Identity Politics

The evidence does not support the conclusion that identity politics has disappeared from India. Instead, the emerging pattern is one of political hybridisation.

Young voters can simultaneously consider:

- employment;
- inflation;
- education;
- development;
- welfare;
- caste;
- religion;
- national security;
- political leadership;
- corruption;
- social justice; and
- local development.

The 2024 youth survey provides a clear example. Respondents identified development as an important positive achievement, but religious identity and the Ram temple were also politically significant. Similarly, the caste census divided respondents almost evenly: 48.2 per cent supported it while 46.2 per cent opposed it. Thus, issue-based politics should not be understood as a complete alternative to identity politics. It is better understood as an additional layer of electoral decision-making.⁹

12. Emerging Characteristics of Young Voters in India

The secondary evidence examined in this study indicates several characteristics of the contemporary young electorate.

12.1 Greater Economic Orientation

Employment, inflation, poverty and economic security are increasingly central to youth political concerns.

12.2 Performance-Based Evaluation

Young voters increasingly evaluate governments through visible outcomes such as development, employment, education, infrastructure and welfare.





12.3 Continued Importance of Leadership

Leadership remains important. The 2024 first-time voter survey demonstrated substantial personal appreciation of political leadership, indicating that issue-based politics does not eliminate leader-centric politics.¹¹

12.4 Persistence of Identity

Caste, religion and cultural issues continue to influence political attitudes. Issue-based politics therefore coexists with identity politics.

12.5 Digital Political Engagement

Young voters are particularly exposed to online political communication, making digital platforms increasingly important for political mobilisation.¹²

12.6 Aspirational Politics

The contemporary young voter is not merely concerned with immediate welfare. There is also a strong aspiration for upward mobility, professional employment, entrepreneurship, better education and improved quality of life.¹⁰

13. Youth Employment and the Politics of Aspirations

The relationship between employment and politics deserves particular attention. The 2025 PLFS data show that youth unemployment remained 9.9 per cent for the 15–29 age group, while 25 per cent of persons aged 15–29 were estimated to be not in employment, education or training (NEET) under the usual-status measure.

These statistics indicate why employment is likely to remain a politically sensitive issue.

For young voters, employment is connected to several broader political expectations:

Education → Skills → Employment → Income → Economic Independence → Social Mobility¹³

Failure at any point in this chain can affect political attitudes. Consequently, political parties that offer credible programmes for employment, skill development, entrepreneurship and economic mobility may gain greater relevance among younger voters.

14. Major Findings

The study produces the following major findings:

1. **Issue-based considerations are becoming increasingly visible in youth political behaviour.** Employment, inflation, education and development have become significant electoral concerns.
2. **Unemployment is the most prominent economic concern among young Indians.** The 2023 Lokniti-CSDS study placed unemployment at the top of the list of national problems identified by youth.
3. **Young voters demonstrate substantial political interest.** In the 2024 Delhi first-time voter survey, 91.9 per cent stated that young people should follow political developments in the country.
4. **Young voters evaluate political parties issue by issue.** The Delhi survey demonstrates differentiated perceptions of parties regarding employment generation, youth concerns and education.





5. **Employment directly influences electoral choice.** The 611-student Delhi survey identified unemployment as the most important issue influencing voting preferences.
6. **Issue-based politics does not eliminate identity politics.** Religion, caste, nationalism and cultural issues remain important.
7. **Leadership remains an important component of youth political behaviour.** Young voters can simultaneously support a leader and evaluate government performance on specific issues.
8. **Economic improvement does not automatically eliminate political concern about employment.** Even though the 2025 PLFS recorded a decline in youth unemployment to 9.9 per cent, employment remains a significant political aspiration.
9. **The youth vote is not homogeneous.** Political preferences vary according to gender, education, social background, occupation, region and economic position.
10. **Indian politics is becoming multidimensional rather than simply issue-based.** The emerging political behaviour combines issue, identity, ideology, leadership and performance considerations.¹⁴

15. Conclusion

The rise of issue-based politics among young voters represents one of the important developments in contemporary Indian electoral politics. The evidence examined in this study demonstrates that young Indians increasingly connect politics with tangible questions affecting their everyday lives. Employment, inflation, education, economic opportunity, development and governance have become politically meaningful because they directly influence the aspirations and expectations of the younger generation.

The 2024 Lok Sabha election provides considerable evidence of this transformation. Lokniti-CSDS studies show that young voters were politically interested, concerned about employment and inflation, and capable of evaluating political parties in relation to specific areas such as youth welfare, employment generation and education. The Delhi study of 611 young students is particularly significant because it directly establishes the relationship between unemployment and voting preferences.

At the same time, it would be analytically incorrect to argue that India has moved completely from identity politics to issue-based politics. Caste, religion, cultural identity, nationalism and political leadership remain important components of electoral behaviour. The evidence instead points towards a hybrid political model, in which identity and ideology interact with economic and governance-related concerns. The most appropriate conclusion is therefore that India is not witnessing the disappearance of identity-based politics but the emergence of a more complex electoral environment in which issue-based politics is becoming an increasingly important determinant of political choice among young voters.

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