

Voting Behaviour Pattern of Lakhimpur: A Study of Lok Sabha Elections From 1985 to 2004



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ABSTRACT: Voting is the main form of political participation in every democratic society such as India. It is an essential process in the democratic set up and plays a pivotal role in smooth functioning and existence of democracy. It is an action of the voters at the time of election. The study analyzes the voting behaviour pattern of Lakhimpur parliamentary constituency from 1985 to 2004 Lok sabha elections.

KEYWORDS: Election, Voting behaviour, Lok sabha, Lakhimpur.

INTRODUCTION

Voting is the main form of political participation in liberal democratic societies. It is an essential process in the democratic set up and plays a pivotal role in smooth functioning and existence of democracy. Voting is considered as the mechanism of reaching consensus and at the same time an imperative means of institutionalising conflicts amid various groups. It is one of those focal points of the democratic process when political activities reach a very high peak (Ganguly and Ganguly, 1975:1). Though the voting appears on the surface to be of transient importance, it surely tells us a great deal about the society and its linkage with the polity (Elkins, 1975: v). Sociologists tend to consider the socio-economic determinants of support for political parties, examining the correlations between class, occupation, ethnicity, sex, age and vote. Political scientists, on the other hand, have concentrated on the influence of political factors such as issues, political programmes, electoral campaigns and the popularity of party leaders on voting behaviour. Samuel J. Eldersveld remarked that voting behaviour connotes today more than examination of voting records, compilation of voting statistics and computation of electoral shifts (Eldersveld, 1972:267). Voting behaviour implies the psychological processes of the voters such as perception, emotion and motivation and relates it to political wisdom. The scientific study of voting behaviour, known as "Psephology" commands a central position in political analysis. This is because voting provides one of the richest sources of information about the interaction between individuals, society and politics.

OBJECTIVES

The broad objectives of the study are -

- i) To highlight the increasing trend of voting percentage.
- ii) To study the electoral politics of Lakhimpur Lok sabha constituency

METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive and analytical based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include Reports of the Election Commission of India, Assam Election Handbooks, election manifestos and party documents. Besides, information from Census of India, Legislative Assembly and manifestoes of the parties are used. The secondary data is collected from relevant books, journals, thesis and other published documents related to the study area and magazines. Internet resources also have been accessed extensively.

Study area

The Lakhimpur Lok sabha constituency is most politically active and vibrant constituency in Assam. It consists of nine Assembly segments namely Majuli (ST), Naoboicha, Lakhimpur, Dhakuakhana (ST), Dhemaji (ST), Jonai (ST), Chabua, Doomdooma and

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Sadiya. The present study made an attempt to study the voting behaviour pattern of Lakhimpur parliamentary constituency from 1985 to 2004 Lok sabha elections.

According to the 2011 Census, Lakhimpur district has a population of 1,042,137. Scheduled Castes and Tribes make up 7.85% and 23.93% of the population respectively. Among the various social groups in Lakhimpur, Assamese speaking people constitute 57.80 percent, Hindi speaking people constitute 1.17 percent, Mising constitute 17.64 percent, Bengali constitute 12.96 percent, Nepali constitute 2.35 percent and Deori constitute 1.21 percent, Tea garden labourers 2.07 percent and Others constitute 4.41 of total population (Table-1). The district is inhabited by the people belonging to various religions, castes and creeds. There are people from Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain, Sikh religions (Table-2).

Table 1. Distribution of population as per language

Sl. No.	Language	Percentage (%)
1.	Assamese	57.80%
2.	Hindi Speaking	1.17%
3.	Mising	17.64%
4.	Bengali	12.96%
5.	Nepali	2.35%
6.	Deori	1.21%
7.	Tea garden labourers	2.07
8.	Sadri	2.46
9	Others	4.41

Source: Census report 2011

Table 2. Distribution of population as per religion

Sl. No.	Name of the Religion	Population in Lakhimpur	
		Number	%
1.	Hindu	797,130	76.49%
2.	Muslim	193,476	18.57%
3.	Christian	46,217	4.43%
4.	Sikh	412	0.04%
5.	Buddhist	1,074	0.1%
6.	Jain	250	0.02 %
7.	Others	2,410	0.23 %
8.	No religion specified	1,168	0.12%

Source: Census of India, 2011

Voting pattern: An overview

The participation of the voters in electoral process is increasing significantly election after elections whether it is parliamentary or state Assembly. Over the last few decades like other parts of India, political mobilization has substantially increased even in this state and Lakhimpur is no exception. The nature of political participation has gradually widened as it incorporates activities such as contesting in the election, seeking information, attending election meeting, participation in election campaign etc. Table-3 highlights the level of political participation in Lakhimpur Lok Sabha elections in the period from 1985 to 2004.

Table 3. Voters turn out in Lakhimpur Lok Sabha elections (1985-2009)

Year of the Lok sabha election	Percentage (%) of votes polled
1985	73.24
1991	72.40
1996	76.82
1998	63.51
1999	72.30
2004	71.02

Source: Election Reports from 1985 to 2004 published by Election department, Government of Assam

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From the above Table, it appears that the highest percentage of votes polled in 1996 Lok Sabha election (76.82%). It also reveals that the voters turn out was comparatively low in the 1998 Lok Sabha election (63.51 percent). The main reason behind it was due to the election boycott call given by the insurgency outfit namely United Liberation Front Assam (ULFA).

Congress dominant phase: 1952- 1977

The period from 1952- 1977 can be termed as Congress dominant phase. After India's independence, during the period from 1952 to 1977, the Congress was the only party that had the capacity to dominate the politics of Lakhimpur (Table- 4). The party could capture this seat for nine times till 2009. In fact, it has been a Congress dominant constituency.

Table 4. Position of the Congress party in Lok Sabha elections in Lakhimpur (1952 to 1977)

Years	Elected candidate			1 st Runners-up candidate		
	Party	Name	Votes polled (%)	Party	Name	Votes polled (%)
1952	Congress	B. Nath	53.8	IND	L. Barbapura	18.7
1957	Congress	Prafulla Baruah	56.1	CPI	K. Goswami	22.7
1962	Congress	Prafulla Baruah	48.8	CPI	B.K. Goswami	24.3
1967	Congress	B. Shastri	50.9	CPI	Sushil Goswami	24.3
1971	Congress	B. Shastri	42.7	Janata	K.N. Saikia	33.8
1977	Congress	Lalit Kr. Doley	59.0	Janata	Mahananda Bora	35.4

Source: Election Results 1952 to 1977, Election Department. Lakhimpur, Assam

Assamese Response to Regionalism: Significant Role of AGP

In 1985 Lok Sabha election out of 9 Assembly segments of Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituency, significantly 8 segments went under the AGP party. At the parliamentary level, Lakhimpur Lok Sabha seat also went in favour of the AGP party. This electoral force ensured the defeat of Congress party. Though the party has entered into post Congress era, it is to be noted that, the Congress party had withdrawn its support to its candidate, Bishwanarayan Shastri for the Lakhimpur Lok Sabha seat. Obviously, the withdrawal of party support to Shastri had ensured the victory of the AGP candidate from Lakhimpur constituency. The main poll plank of AGP in 1985 election was "Assam accord". The people voted the party with the hope that lakhs of foreigners, who were living in the constituency also, would be deported and the dream of "Sonar Asom" would be established. In the election fray, Gakul Saikia, from the AGP party could obtain 2,51,730 votes with 50.22 percent of votes polled, who defeated CPI candidate, Nameswar Pegu with a big margin of 5,01,246 votes. Pegu obtained 81,796 votes with only 16.31 percent of votes polled. Saikia could make strong support base in Assamese dominated Lakhimpur segment, tea garden dominated Chabua segment, Muslim dominated Naoboicha segment and among the people of tribal community in Dhakuakhana, Dhemaji, Majuli and Jonai segments. The AGP party could attain this seat for three times. (Table - 5). In the Lok Sabha election of 1996, there was a remarkable change as the political situation was reversed to regional party's dominance. The people of Lakhimpur responded to the regional party AGP. Unlike 1991 election, the AGP could build a better image among the voters, which again symbolized regionalism in Lakhimpur and in Assam at a large. Through this election the changing attitude of the voters can be measured, while the voters gave their verdict in favour of the congress party in 1991, rejected the party in 1996. Through this 1996 election, the Congress party suffered a setback. The root causes behind the setback of the Congress party in the parliamentary constituency were - First of all, the misdeed of the Congress party at the state level led to the set back of the Congress candidate in Lakhimpur. Secondly, the long standing local issue likes flood and erosion, unemployment, water supply, electrification etc. could not be solved during the term.

Table 5. AGP's position in Lakhimpur 1985 to 2004

Year	Elected candidate			1 st Runners-up candidate		
	Party	Name	Voting percent- age (%)	Party	Name	Voting percent - age (%)
1985	AGP	Gakul Saikia	50.22	CPI	Nameswar Pegu	16.32
1991	Congress	Bolin Kuli	31.36	AGP	I.P. Hazarika	21.10
1996	AGP	Dr.Arun Kumar Sharma	33.06	Congress	Bolin Kuli	32.54
1998	Congress	Ranee Narah	40.05	AGP	Dr.Arun Kumar Sharma	22.05

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1999	Congress	Ranee Narah	34.40	AGP	Sarbanada Sonowal	27.07
2004	AGP	Dr.Arun Kumar Sharma	37.61	Congress	Ranee Narah	34.09

Source: Election Results, 1985 to 2004, Lakhimpur, Assam

Besides, the people were not satisfied at the work of Congress which resulted in their unwillingness to cast votes in favour of Congress party. Thirdly, reunification of AGP and NAGP was another important factor responsible for the defeat of the Congress party. Besides, after the election debacle in 1991, the AGP party and NAGP were assimilated. The unification move has strengthened the regional forces. The law and order situation had also helped AGP to come back to power. The insurgency issues such as United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Bodo Security Force (BSF) had created a complicated situation all over Assam. As usually upper Assam was known as the birth place of ULFA.

The death of the Chief Minister Hiteswar Saikia, just five days before polling, shocked the Congress party to its base since he was the pillar of its campaign and no leader in the state even approximated his stature (Roy, 1996). Under such circumstances, the Congress could not show the better performance in the state as well as in Lakhimpur. Apart from the above reasons, most important one was that the people of Assam had no alternative except AGP to fulfill their hope and aspiration and they voted AGP to power again in 1996. Besides, the people of Lakhimpur wanted to give a chance for the second time. The AGP party could strengthen its position in Assamese dominated areas. Arun Kumar Sharma whom the AGP party offered party ticket remained more popular among the people. It may be mentioned that Arun Kumar Sharma is originally a college teacher and perhaps for this, he was well known to the students and large section of people. Further as an administrator, he is hoped to work for the betterment of the people and towards development of the district. Therefore, to fulfill the dreams and aspirations of the people of Lakhimpur, which is a remotely situated district from the capital and suffering from various problems and backwardness, the people voted him to power. On the other hand, the Congress candidate, Bolin Kuli from tea garden community, which helped him to secure a large amount of votes from tea garden dominated areas. However, the AGP's victory showed a decline of Congress influence among the tea garden labourers.

In 2004 Lok Sabha election, voter of Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituency proved that they had faith on regional force. They strongly supported the AGP by rejecting the Congress party. In this election, the regional party AGP capitalized the misdeeds of the Congress party. The petty quarrel within the Congress also helped the AGP party to wrest the Lakhimpur seat. At the same time, it became urgent for the Assamese electorates to root out the corrupt and ineffective Congress government, which miserably failed to fulfill the expectation of the people. Further, the Assamese voters did not find out any alternative. Above all, the AGP party made a well managed move. The party nominated Arun Sharma, whom it denied in 1999 Lok Sabha election. On the other hand, Sarbananda Sonowal was shifted to Dibrugarh Lok Sabha constituency, which is his home constituency. In this election, the AGP party realised their mistake that it denied Sharma to offer a ticket, instead the party offered the ticket to Sarbananda Sonowal who lost to Ranee Narah in 1999. The election had shown the resurgence of regionalism in the constituency. One of the most decisive characteristics in 2004 Lok Sabha election in Lakhimpur was the shift of the tea garden labourers, traditionally considered as the vote bank of the Congress (Table-6). Though Naoboicha is predominantly a Muslim dominated segment; it has considerable section of tea garden labourers. Therefore, it is also presented as tea garden area. The table reveals that the tea garden workers, who normally voted for Congress, were changing their stands. In the electoral politics of Lakhimpur, the contemporary trend shows the declining influence of the Congress among the tea garden labourers while the other parties like the AGP and the BJP were spreading their influence among this community.

Table 6. Voter's turn out in tea garden dominated Assembly segments (1999-2004)

Tea garden dominated Assembly segments	2004	1999
Chabua	21.17	45.66
Naoboicha	36.36	50.09
Doomdoma	23.72	59.72

Source: Election Results, 1999 and 2004, Government of Assam, Dispur

The AGP and Congress equally received the better responses from the voters of tribal and rural areas. Besides all, Lakhimpur witnessed a triangular contest between the Congress, the BJP and the AGP parties in 2004 Lok sabha election. These three political parties tried to consolidate themselves among various social groups.

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Congress party: Regained its sagging image

In the Lok Sabha election of 1991, the Congress party regained its sagging image by securing this seat. On the other hand the AGP party, whom the Assamese people accepted as a political alternative to protect and preserve their identity and interest, had lost this seat. The party lost the faith of the people and it could not carry out its pre-election pledges of 1985 and even miserably failed on all fronts. The main reasons behind the decline of AGP in 1991 election were - faction within the party, not fulfilling the hopes and aspiration of the people and negligence to the foreign national issue and non-implementation of Assam accord. In the eve of 1985 election, it was the AGP party, who promised to establish "Sonar Asom" of Assamese people and talked about unity and integrity, forgot the promises after coming to power. The party was divided into two fractions i.e. AGP and NAGP. As a consequence, votes were divided between the two parties, which helped the Congress party to re-establish its sagging image. Further the AGP party could not fulfill the interest and aspiration of the Assamese people. Even the party neglected the issue of 'Assam Accord' which was the main plank in 1985 election. On the other hand, it was a surprise for the Assamese electorate that the foreign national problem and implementation of Assam accord were not included in its 1991 election manifesto. However the party gave more emphasis on the question of "Greater Autonomy" and the right of self determination for the state. Moreover, the solution of the ethnic issues seemed to have found importance in their manifesto, where the party's stand on foreign national issue put the AGP in an embarrassing position all over Assam. The Congress party under the leadership of Hiteswar Saikia took the advantage of the misdeeds and incapability of the regional party. In this election, the Congress party wrest the seat from the AGP party. The party candidate Bolin Kuli captured the seat by securing 1, 87,610 votes with 31.36 percent of votes polled. He defeated Iswar Prasana Hazarika, who belonged to AGP party, secured only 1, 26,250 votes with 21.10 percent of votes polled.

In 1998 parliamentary election, the voters turn out was 63.45 percent. One of the most striking features of this election was boycott call given by the militant organizations. The militant organization like ULFA and BSF threatened the Assamese people to boycott the election. They called the people to keep away from the electoral process. In most of the areas, the voting percentage was significantly low. Another striking feature in this election was that the AGP party badly suffered a setback. In 1998 parliamentary elections, Congress candidate Ranee Narah won by 2,68,794 votes out of 6,71,209 valid votes polled in the constituency

In 1999 Lok Sabha election, the Congress party consolidated its hold that it made in 1998. Ranee Narah again was elected from this seat who could register her name in 1998 Lok Sabha election. This time, Sarbananda Sonowal was offered the AGP party ticket instead of Arun Kumar Sharma who succeeded in winning from this constituency in 1996 for the AGP. But Sarbananda Sonowal was defeated by the candidate of Congress party. With the defeat of Sonowal, AGP's third major setback came in this constituency. The main reasons behind the failure of the AGP party in this constituency were- i) the party did not offer the party ticket to Arun Sharma ii) Ranee Narah was a candidate from the Congress party, could establish a better image among the people iii) she helped and cooperated with the common people, who were poor and lived in rural and unhygienic areas and distributed Tat Sal among the rural and poor women, which gave them self sustenance and paved the way for self employment and good living. The Congress candidate, Ranee Narah secured 34.40 percent of votes polled while Sarbananda Sonowal from AGP stood second position by obtaining 27.07 percent votes.

From the above discussion, it can be said that not only the national party but even the regional party has managed to capture the Lakhimpur Lok Sabha seat. Every Lok Sabha election has a unique character which influence upon the voters from time to time. However in Lakhimpur, the primacy of the Congress party is demonstrated by its ability to capture the seat between 1952 to 1977. As a regional political party, the AGP's contribution to the political history of Lakhimpur is also significant. This constituency for the first time came under non Congress dispensation in 1985, while the regional political party AGP came into existence and since then, the AGP and the Congress party has influence in the political scenario of Lakhimpur parliamentary constituency and either one or the other party come to power in an alternative way. Furthermore the BJP, a national force in alliance with the regional force has also made inroads slowly into this constituency. The party has emerged as a significant electoral force since 1996 and an admittedly growing party, which had been successful in drawing the Assamese votes in Lakhimpur constituency. Apart from these three political parties, the Left parties have also its significant influence in Lakhimpur. In the current political setup of Lakhimpur, there are three main contestants, namely – the Congress, the AGP and the BJP parties that have made inroads into the electoral politics of Lakhimpur constituency.

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