

Voting Behavior in Candidate Selection: A Study in Rangpur Division

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Abstract

Voting behavior is getting importance day by day due to the emerging culture of people centric democratic practices. Numbers of factor influence people's behavior when they select a particular candidate or party to vote for. Even choices may vary regarding local and national level elections. Across that line of comparison, this study aims to find which personal traits of the candidates are considered most by the voters when they decide whom to vote. Moreover, this study, in general, tries to explore the demands of the voters to their preferred candidates. This study is limited to four districts of Rangpur Division namely Rangpur, Kurigram, Thakurgaon and Dinajpur. After a questionnaire survey on 220 people and statistical analyzing of the data, this study finds that majority voters prefer personal image and previous performance of the candidate in both local government and national elections. In the national election, in particular, candidate's affiliation to the party also hold high rank priority in voter's preference. Meanwhile, given the demands of the voters to their candidates, price control of goods and services, and quality education almost jointly come first in the priority list.

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Introduction

Election or vote is the sine qua non for democratic practice. Harun (1986) says - "Elections are an essential Cinderella of political development particularly in developing politics, in that the citizenry thereby receive political training and the orientation required for nourishing democracy in a meaningful perspective". In this regard, voting is the only mean through which democracy finds its true meaning. Voting behavior, the other hand, is the part of political behavior which includes the attitudes, preferences and motivations of the voters when they vote for a particular candidate or a party in an election. Curtis ed. (1962) mentions Interest, discussion, motivation, knowledge and rationality as the important traits of voting behavior.

The characteristics of voting behavior depend on social, psychological and economic factors. Those factors motivate people, or abstains them from casting vote. Firstly, sociological theories of voting behavior argue that family, culture, group identity, kinship, religion, cast, lineage, language etc play significant roles in shaping the voting behavior of the citizens. For example, voters of a particular religion or cast may vote for the candidates of same identities, leaving other criteria like merit, personal trait, education, different region etc insignificant.

Secondly, psychological theories deal with individual choice, perception, emotion or opinion of the voters towards the candidates and the parties. According to Eldersveld (1956)–

Voting behavior connotes today more than examination of voting records, compilation of voting statistics, and computation of electoral shifts. Students are deeply immersed in analysis of individual psychological processes (perception, emotion, motivation), and their relation to political action, as well as of institutional patterns, such as the communication process, and their impact on elections.

Through those practices, individual may think beyond its own social, cultural, religious domain, identifying itself being the part of a larger group, the group largely formed on the basis of a single identity or ideology. For example, a voter may feel affiliation with a political party, and every political party has its own ideology, and set of principles. In this case, the voter will vote a candidate not for its personal trait, or cultural-religious affiliation with the voter, but for the voter's preferred political party the candidate represents.

Finally, Voters may choose their parties and candidates on the basis of their self-interest. That is, neither from social aspect, nor from emotion, but from economic point of view, a voter may vote those who the voters believe will serve their personal objectives. This gain may not have gross value, or it may sometimes have negative effect, but if it fulfills the specific demand of the voters, they must vote for it to those who will serve it if elected. Therefore, there is a cost-benefit analysis measured by the voters, sometimes called the economic or rational theory of voting behavior. Ponton & Gill (1988) say - "The initial assumptions made as to how people exercised their vote was that they acted as rational maximizers, that is, having thought about what policies they wanted they then voted for the person they believed most likely to deliver them."

Meanwhile, voting behavior in Bangladesh is contextual at large. According to Eldersveld (1956) - "Although voting behavior is considered being a part of political behavior, the contexts in which individual's behavior is being examined, are different". In a nutshell, Bangladesh has historically seen high voter turnout, reflecting strong public interest in elections, despite challenges such as violence or allegations of corruption.

The war of independence in 1971 plays a great role in shaping voting behavior of the people of Bangladesh. Parties often use their own narratives to appeal the voters regarding the war of independence. National and ethnic identity also plays important role, mainly across Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism. Religion, on the other hand, plays a vital role in the political culture of Bangladesh, and parties try to attract people by their own versions of interpretation of religion. People of Bangladesh are largely conservative in their religious belief, but highly liberal and peaceful in religious practice at the same time. They are neither fanatic, nor they are intolerant. But, they won't allow any sort of criticism about their religion, especially Islam.

Meanwhile, People of Bangladesh are still being highly motivated by dynasty type legacy politics, that is, they seemingly prefer family identity by far than personal and impersonal traits of both candidates and parties. Like monarchy, it has been taken for granted that the throne of the party leaderships will be hereditary adorned by the bloodlines of those leaders. Moreover, in the local government election, still today patron-client relationships and family identity play a great role to shape voter's decision making. Bureaucracy, on the other hand, plays an important role in voting behavior. Most of the people of Bangladesh believe that bureaucracy doesn't play neutral role in conducting elections. Election commission also believed to have lack of freedom and authority to conduct free and fair election. Party in power tends to be unwilling to allow neutral election. So, there always remains high possibility that the

election will be rigged. Consequently, voters lost interest to vote, lose confidence to participate in democratic practice.

Voter's choice also differs across rural-urban division because difference in economic, societal and political practices between the two geographies creates different tastes and expectations among citizens. Rural voters often prioritize local development issues like roads, schools, healthcare, agriculture, social security etc. Urban voters, on the other hand, seems to want urban facilities safe water, amusement, sound traffic, gas and electricity supply, security of life and property etc. Rural people tend to be more concerned with local politics whereas urban people with national-level policies.

Social media like Facebook & X, YouTube and Television Talk Show are the most prominent means nowadays used by the party leaders and candidates in the voting campaign. Due to the revolution in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), voters have got easy access to those platforms; spending large share of time per day to browse them, getting highly influenced by the YouTubers, bloggers or talk show speakers, even changing existing decisions, making or breaking relationship with parties and candidates. Overall, voting behavior in Bangladesh covers all the areas of sociological, psychological and economic theories.

This study, however, regarding the vast area of voting behavior, limits itself to candidate's personal traits and voter's demand only. Additionally, this study compares between national and local government elections to see whether voters evaluate their candidates' personal traits differently. Due to limitation in time, cost and access to information, this study confines its area within a single Division, Rangpur.

There is lack of secondary literature regarding the given issue. Ziauddin (1989) focuses on psychological dimension of voting behavior as related to political-apolitical group composition, sex and urban-rural residential background in the socio-political context of Bangladesh. He explores relation between political and apolitical groups, between urban and rural voters, and between male and female in terms of voting behavior. Harun (1986), on the other hand, focuses on general elections and contemporary Bangladesh society during the national election in 1973. He attempts to identify some important variables in Bangladesh voting behavior having ramifications on evolving political processes and possibly on future electoral happenings.

Hossain, Aktar & Islam (2017) conducted research on voting behavior at local level election in Rangpur district. They especially explore the relationship

of voting behavior with the socio- politico and economic determinants. They don't focus on any single issue, rather discussed in general different issues of both political and non-political. Additionally, they had no intention of comparison between local and national government election regarding the voting behavior of the voters towards their candidates.

Therefore, it is evident that, there seems to have no study so far regarding candidate's personal traits and voter's demands. Given the research gap, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Which personal traits of the candidates are considered by the voters when they vote in both national and local government elections?
2. Are those traits differing across national and local government election?
3. What are the demands of the voters to their candidates?

To answer those questions, this study conducts a survey in Rangpur division just before the 11th National Election of Bangladesh.

Methodology

Eldersveld (1956) classifies the study of voting behavior into several categories namely hypothesis-testing exploratory study, mass-tabulation case study, comparative statistical survey, single-hypothesis trend study and hypothesis-testing factorial analysis.

Meanwhile, the findings of the study are mainly based on primary data, conducting a questionnaire survey in four districts of Rangpur, Kurigram, Thakurgaon and Dinajpur. However, before the survey, a baseline observation has been conducted in terms of election campaigns, candidate's speech, party manifesto and free discussion with the voters. Out of the observation, it is found that the major personal traits of the candidates that the voters largely measure and justify are party affiliation, personal image, educational quality, religion, family identity, previous performance, wealth and power, gender and so on.

In terms of voter's demands to the candidate, the baseline observation finds almost similar responses following both local and national government elections. Voter's demands include electrification, job guarantee, drug eradication, police help, gas, industrialization, gender and development, price control, quality education, government job, terrorism eradication, life & property security, right to internet, better roads and communications, food safety, quality health, environmental protection, subsidy in agriculture, corruption free administration, social security, religious freedom, urban facilities and so on. Based on the findings of baseline observation, the close-ended questionnaire is prepared.

At first, eight constituencies from each of the eight districts are randomly selected. After that, out of the selected constituencies, four are randomly selected namely Rangpur-3, Kurigram-2 and Thakurgaon-2 and Dinajpur-6. A sample of 55 respondents is selected purposively for questionnaire survey from each of the constituencies, combining a representative population sample of 220 people. After that, the collected data is analyzed using SPSS software where descriptive statistical methods are used. Finally, based on the statistics, findings are interpreted in table, donut chart and bar diagram.

Key Findings

a. Demographic information of the respondents

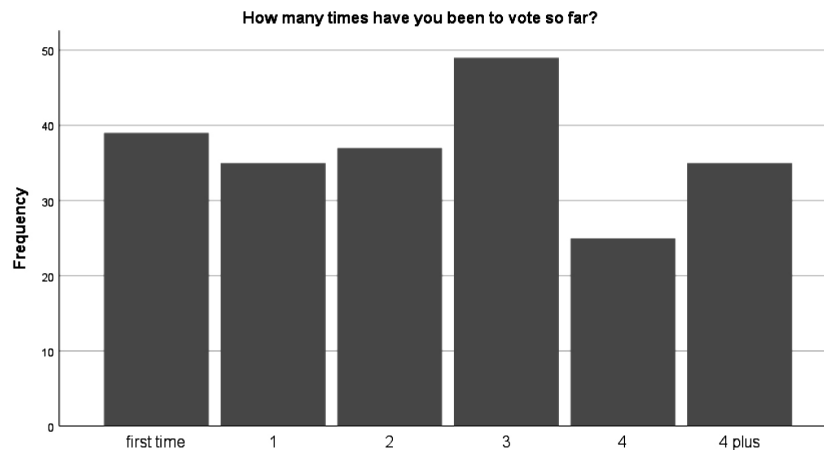
The demographic information of the respondents shown in the table illustrate that there are 134 male, 85 female and only 1 is third gender (other), representing 60.9%, 38.6% and .5% of the total respondents respectively. In different age groups, 37.7% of the total respondents fall between the age of 18 and 30 while 33.6% and 25.5% goes to 31-45 and 46-60 age groups respectively.

The occupational data shows that, a quarter of the respondents identify themselves as student while only 11.4% represents farmers and related professionals. Businessmen and unidentified professionals have almost same proportion, combining 44.1% of the total sample, following Job holders at 19.5%. Educational qualifications, on the other hand, have the highest share of 40% graduates, following 20.9% higher secondary and 18.6% from secondary background.

Profile of the sampled respondents (n= 220)					
Sex	Frequency	Percentage	Age	Frequency	Percentage
Male	134	60.9%	18-30	83	37.7%
Female	85	38.6%	31-45	74	33.6%
Transgender	1	.5%	46-60	56	25.5%
			60 plus	7	3.2%
Occupation	Frequency	Percentage	Education	Frequency	Percentage
Agriculture	25	11.4%	Literate	29	13.2%
Job	43	19.5%	L. Secondary	15	6.8%
Business	47	21.4%	Secondary	41	18.6%
Student	55	25.0%	H. Secondary	46	20.9%
Other	50	22.7%	Graduate	89	40.5%

The overall demographic data ensure that the sample of the population is well distributed and well representative, fulfilling required assumptions for further statistical analysis.

b. voting experience of the respondents

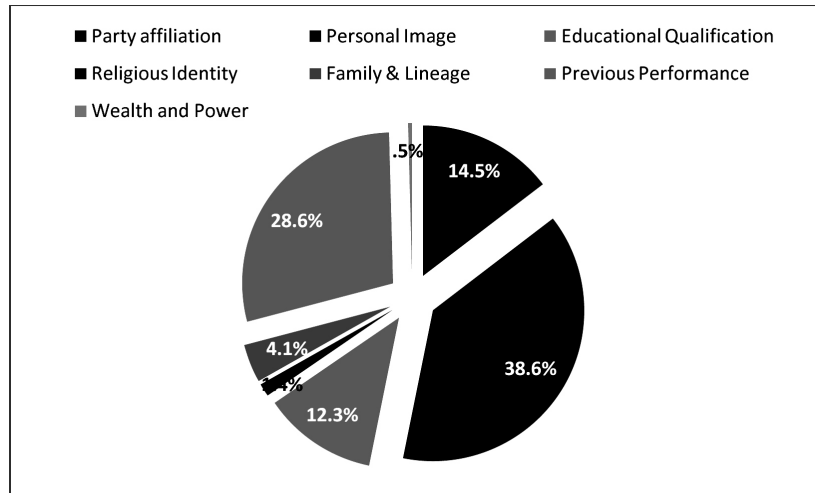


Regarding the voting experience of the respondents, 22.3% of them have voted three times so far 17.7% says that they are going to cast vote for the first time. 32.7% respondents almost equally share either once or twice in terms of voting experience while 27.3% voters have either four times, or more than four times of voting experience.

The overall data of the sample shows that distribution of voting experience is normal and well representative to the population, fulfilling required assumptions for further statistical analysis.

c. Voting behavior in local government election

Study shows that, 38.6% of all respondents rank personal image of the candidate at first place while 28.6% voters prefer most the previous performance of the candidate before deciding whom to vote. On the other hand, educational qualification and party affiliation, with almost equal share, together cover 26.8% of the total sample. Family & lineage, religious identity, and wealth and power together insignificantly share 6% of the total respondents.

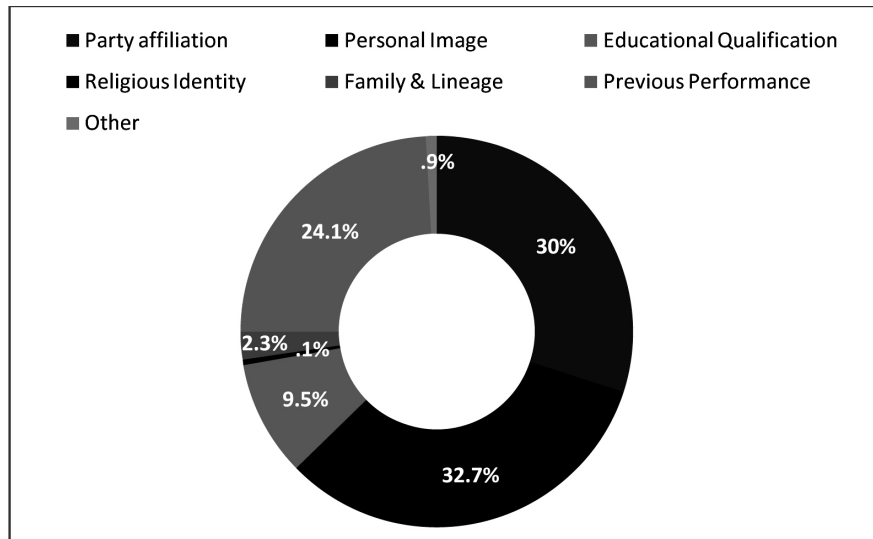


Voter's choice about candidate's personal traits in the local government election

The overall data reveals that almost two-third of the total voters mostly prefer candidate's impersonal behavior and job performance as a politician. It is also noticeable that, traditional patron-client type values like family and lineage, or wealth and power play trivial role in voter's behavior nowadays. Similarly, religious identity has little value as well, projecting the liberal behavior of the voters towards their candidates. Meanwhile, nearly 15% representation of party affiliation reveals that political identity of the candidates plays considerably important role to shape voter's choice. Similarly, same comment can be drawn in terms of candidate's educational qualification.

d. Voting behavior in National government election

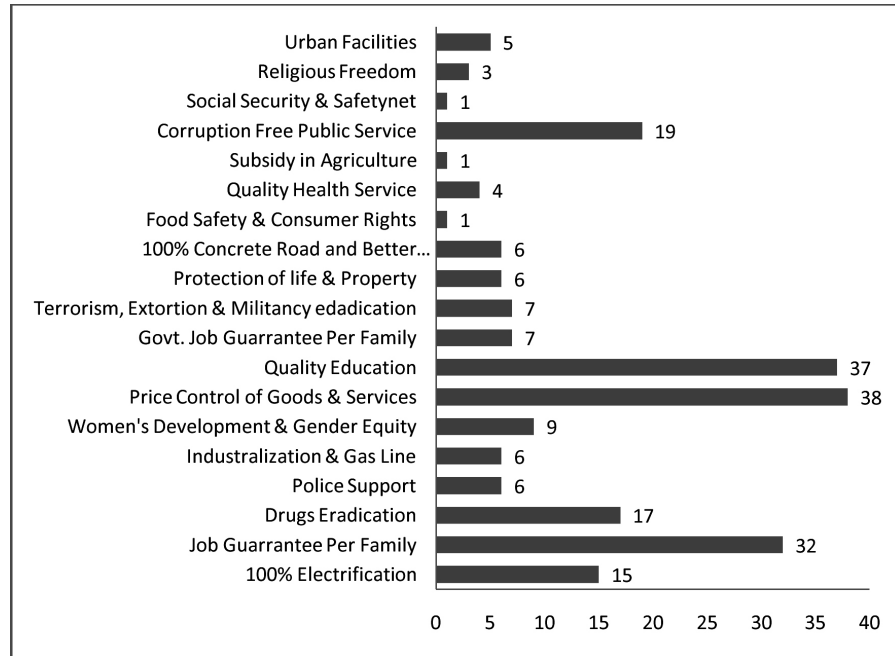
In the national election, the data of this study shows that, personal image of the candidate comes first in voter's choice list; with 32.7% of the total voters stand for it. Like local government, previous performance of the candidate also play important role in national government election as 24.1% voters rank it in the first position. However, unlike local election, party affiliation of the candidate has greater value than his or her individual performance; with 30% voters give it the highest priority while selecting candidate. Education also plays moderate role in voter's choice list because one-tenth of the total respondents still think them the most important issue. However, like local election, religious identity, family and lineage, and other issues plays tiny role regarding this issue, covering only 3.3% combined.



The overall data reveals that, in line with personality and previous performance of the candidates, political identity or party affiliation plays significant role in the national government election with regard to voter's behavior in the selection of the candidate. Educational qualification plays moderately important role in both levels of election, following insignificant preference on religious identity, wealth or family identity.

e. Voter's demands towards the candidates:

The data illustrates that, none of the agenda has single most significance, rather, with nearly equal share, Price control of goods and service, quality education and job guaranty per family get valued most by the voters, together covering nearly 49% of the total respondents. On the other hand, corruption free public service, drug eradication, and 100% electrification have almost same number of response; combine share about 23% of the total sample, indicating moderate level of importance in the voter's demand list. Given the fact, 100% concrete road & better communication, protection of life & property, fight against terrorism, government job guaranty, women's development, industrialization, and police support have almost the same number of response with the mean value of 6.71. Finally, other issues seem to have insignificant responses.



Voter's expectations and demands to their preferred candidates

Overall, it can be inferred from the chart that, voters have more dependency on politicians than on market regarding control of price of goods and service. The result also seems that, although having more than 70% literacy rate and right to education, it still far from the expected quality. High level of demand for job guaranty also validates the argument that unemployment is one of the major problems in our country. Moderate level of importance to the voter's demand list in terms of electrification, drug control, and governmental corruption projects that these sectors, although not up to the mark yet, have performed well over last few decades because once they were the major problems in our country. Similarly, low responses in police support and women's issue infer that, those sectors, although not fully satisfying, are comparatively doing well than the past.

Conclusion

Voting behavior in becoming an important issue in the academia of Bangladesh politics. Therefore, this study tries to spot focus on it, especially in terms of candidates. It believes that, if voter's behavior towards the candidate is understood, it will lead to generate new knowledge in the given field. The findings of the study, in this regard, hopefully manages to serve this purpose. The

key finding reveals that, candidate's personal traits and performance play great role to attract voters rather than his or her wealth, religious or family identity. Party affiliation and identity, on the other hand, have less impact in local level election, but more in national election.

Regarding the demands of the voters, the study infers that price control of goods and services is the prime problem to address for the voters, following their inability to access to quality education. So, in addition to right to education, quality education is becoming a growing interest among the voters. The overall finding of the study concludes that voter's choice and demand differs little across national and local government election regarding their candidates.

Having said that, this study has the limitation of assessing the impact of social and electronic media to shape voter's choice regarding their candidate. This gap can be studied later on. Finally, this study is only limited to Rangpur division which may be conducted nationwide in the future.

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