

Comparative Electoral Psychology in Democratic and Pseudo-Democratic Regimes

Dr. Smita Tiwary Ojha¹, Aditya Ojha²

¹Email: [stojha\[at\]amity.edu](mailto:stojha[at]amity.edu)

²BALLB(H), Amity University Noida

Abstract: *Electoral psychology explores the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of political engagement among voters. While robust in democratic contexts, this domain remains underexplored in pseudo-democratic regimes where electoral processes exist but lack substantive democratic features. This article presents a comparative analysis of electoral psychology across democratic and pseudo-democratic systems, examining the roles of political efficacy, trust, identity, media influence, and coercion. Drawing on cross-regime data and psychological theories, we identify key divergences in voter behaviour, motivation, and perception, highlighting the socio-political mechanisms that shape electoral cognition under different regime types. The paper concludes with implications for democratic resilience, authoritarian adaptation, and future research trajectories. Electoral psychology explores the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of political engagement among voters. While robust in democratic contexts, this domain remains underexplored in pseudo-democratic regimes where electoral processes exist but lack substantive democratic features. This article presents a comparative analysis of electoral psychology across democratic and pseudo-democratic systems, examining the roles of political efficacy, trust, identity, media influence, and coercion. Drawing on cross-regime data and psychological theories, we identify key divergences in voter behaviour, motivation, and perception, highlighting the socio-political mechanisms that shape electoral cognition under different regime types.*

Keywords: Electoral Psychology, Demographic systems, Democratic emotions, Instrumental voting

1. Introduction

The study of electoral behaviour has traditionally centered on mature democracies, where free and fair elections serve as the cornerstone of political participation. However, many regimes conduct elections under authoritarian or hybrid conditions- commonly categorized as pseudo-democracies or competitive authoritarian regimes- raising critical questions about the psychological underpinnings of electoral participation in such environments.

This paper explores comparative electoral psychology, contrasting voter behaviour and psychological orientations in democratic versus pseudo-democratic systems. By integrating psychological theories with political regime analysis, we aim to uncover how systemic constraints and opportunities influence voter cognition, emotion, and behaviour. Electoral psychology investigates the mental processes involved in political decision-making- ranging from information processing, attitude formation, and emotional responses to participatory behaviour.

Comparative Dimensions of Electoral Psychology

In democratic systems, voters often exhibit high internal efficacy, believing their participation matters. External efficacy depends on institutional trust. In pseudo-democracies, learned helplessness or strategic compliance may dominate, with individuals doubting that elections produce real change, leading to apathy or cynical participation. Democratic voters may vary in trust based on political alignment but tend to differentiate between institutions and actors. Pseudo-democratic voters often express diffuse distrust, conflating ruling elites with the state apparatus, which may breed resigned loyalty or silent dissent. Democratic participation is driven by civic duty, issue salience, and candidate affinity, often mediated by deliberation and ideology. In pseudo-democracies, emotions

such as fear, hope for patronage, or social pressure are prominent motivators, especially where surveillance or vote-buying is prevalent.

Democratic voters often encounter a pluralistic media ecosystem, allowing for selective exposure and confirmation bias. In pseudo-democracies, state-controlled or censored media leads to limited cognitive elaboration, reinforcement of propaganda, or dual cognition- public conformity vs. private dissent.

Identity voting in democracies may be linked to ideology, race, religion, or region but is often tempered by competitive pluralism. In pseudo-democratic regimes, identity is often instrumentalized by the state (e.g., ethnic outbidding, populist nationalism) and serves as a tool for regime legitimation.

2. Methodological Considerations

Comparative research faces several challenges: Political concepts (like trust or efficacy) may carry different meanings across cultures and regimes. Surveys in authoritarian contexts are often censored, biased, or subject to social desirability effects. Voter turnout may not reflect genuine political will but rather obligation or coercion.

Innovative methods- such as randomized response techniques, experimental vignettes, or indirect questioning- can mitigate these limitations. Future studies should emphasize longitudinal designs, interdisciplinary approaches, and focus on emerging hybrid regimes.

Understanding voter psychology across regime types reveals the deep interplay between political structure and mental life. While democratic regimes nourish psychological engagement through choice and pluralism, pseudo-democracies shape

electoral behaviour through manipulation, coercion, and symbolic participation. This comparative lens broadens our grasp of political cognition and highlights the need to safeguard not only electoral processes but the psychological conditions for genuine democratic participation. The psychological mechanisms of voting cannot be fully understood without contextualizing them within political regimes. Democratic resilience depends on fostering informed, empowered electorates, while pseudo-democracies evolve strategies to psychologically manage participation and dissent. Comparative electoral psychology thus provides insights into: Authoritarian adaptability, Democratic backsliding, Civic education strategies & Global democratic norms

Electoral psychology examines how individual perceptions, cognitive processes, emotions, and motivations shape voter behaviour. While traditional studies have focused on stable democracies, the rise of pseudo-democratic regimes- political systems that maintain electoral processes without genuine competition or institutional integrity- demands an expanded lens. This article critically compares the psychological underpinnings of electoral behavior in democratic and pseudo-democratic contexts. Drawing on cross-national empirical data, political psychology theories, and regime classification literature, we unpack how regime type shapes political efficacy, identity-based voting, trust, media processing, and emotion-driven participation. We argue that while both systems engage electoral participation, the psychological architecture and motivational frameworks differ substantially, revealing profound implications. Electoral psychology examines how individual perceptions, cognitive processes, emotions, and motivations shape voter behaviour. While traditional studies have focused on stable democracies, the rise of pseudo-democratic regimes- political systems that maintain electoral processes without genuine competition or institutional integrity- demands an expanded lens. This article critically compares the psychological underpinnings of electoral behavior in democratic and pseudo-democratic contexts. Drawing on cross-national empirical data, political psychology theories, and regime classification literature, we unpack how regime type shapes political efficacy, identity-based voting, trust, media processing, and emotion-driven participation. We argue that while both systems engage electoral participation, the psychological architecture and motivational frameworks differ substantially, revealing profound implications. According to Dahl (1971), democracies are characterized by political pluralism, meaningful competition, inclusive participation, and guaranteed civil liberties. In such systems, elections are tools of accountability, allowing citizens to reward or punish leaders. These are systems where elections are held, but they are neither free nor fair. Opposition is often constrained, media is controlled, and electoral outcomes are predetermined or manipulated. Terms like competitive authoritarianism, electoral autocracy, and hybrid regimes fall under this umbrella. Comparative electoral psychology reveals that while voting is a common act across regimes, its psychological meaning, motivation, and consequence vary dramatically. In democracies, it represents empowerment and choice. In pseudo-democracies, it may symbolize submission, resistance, or survival. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not just for academic inquiry but for policy,

diplomacy, and civil society strategies aimed at fostering authentic democratic engagement and countering authoritarian normalization. India presents a unique laboratory for exploring electoral psychology: a robust constitutional democracy with regular competitive elections, yet increasingly marked by democratic backsliding, media manipulation, and majoritarian narratives. This article examines the psychological dimensions of voting behaviour in India, situating it within the broader framework of democratic and pseudo-democratic regime dynamics. Using political psychology, media studies, and identity theory, we analyse how voter efficacy, emotional mobilization, political trust, and social identity influence Indian electoral behaviour. The Indian case illustrates the complex interplay of democratic engagement and authoritarian tendencies, revealing the fragile psychological foundations upon which electoral legitimacy rests. India is the world's largest democracy, with over 900 million registered voters and a vibrant electoral culture. It conducts frequent elections at national, state, and local levels with high voter turnout. However, recent years have seen growing concerns about electoral fairness, media freedom, and institutional independence—suggesting the emergence of pseudo-democratic traits within a formally democratic structure.

Thus, India represents a hybrid space: constitutionally democratic, yet increasingly operating with centralized authority, weakened opposition, and symbolic electoralism. This makes it a vital case for studying comparative electoral psychology. Despite socioeconomic challenges, Indian voters often express high internal efficacy, especially among rural populations and first-time voters. Participation is seen as a form of self-expression and empowerment—reflected in slogans like *‘My vote, my voice.’* Women in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have shown increasing participation, driven by self-perceived agency even amid patriarchal norms. However, many citizens exhibit low external efficacy, believing that their votes do not significantly influence policies. This is especially visible among urban youth, who view politics as corrupt and distant. The use of clientelism, token welfare, or electoral sops often substitutes for policy-based governance, reducing elections to transactional experiences. This weakens rational efficacy and encourages instrumental voting. Election Commission of India (ECI) historically enjoyed high public trust. However, post-2014, its perceived neutrality has declined, especially after its delayed action on violations of the Model Code of The Conduct by powerful politicians.

Judicial independence, another pillar of external efficacy, is also under scrutiny due to selective activism and deferment of politically sensitive cases. Traditional motivations like hope, aspiration, and civic pride continue, especially during high-stakes elections such as the Lok Sabha (general) elections. Campaigns often appeal to positive nationalism and development narratives (e.g., *Vikas, Sabka Saath*). State-aligned media and WhatsApp-based disinformation campaigns create emotionally charged echo chambers. Political communication is often devoid of policy but rich in identity signaling and emotional triggers. India's electoral history includes caste-based coalitions, regional pride, language-based movements, and minority

mobilizations. These have often strengthened pluralist democracy by ensuring representation.

High voter turnout, especially in rural and poor areas, reflects deep democratic instincts. Many voters view participation as a sacred duty, irrespective of outcome. Grassroots mobilization by parties like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) or regional parties demonstrates rational and deliberative engagement.

Psychological Contradictions in Indian Electoral Democracy

Psychological Variable	Democratic Traits	Pseudo-democratic Traits
Political Efficacy	Empowerment, civic duty	Learned helplessness, fatalism
Emotion	Hope, optimism	Fear, resentment, nationalism
Trust in institutions	Selective and dynamic	Declining, cynical, polarized
Identity	Multiplicity, fluidity	Majoritarian essentialism
Media influence	Deliberation, activism	Propaganda, polarization
Turnout motivation	Belief in change	Reward, coercion, habit

Local elections and citizen movements (e.g., RTI, anti-corruption, farmers’ protests) reveal continued psychological commitment to democracy. Local elections and citizen movements (e.g., RTI, anti-corruption, farmers’ protests) reveal continued psychological commitment to democracy. Local elections and citizen movements (e.g., RTI, anti-corruption, farmers’ protests) reveal continued psychological commitment to democracy.

India’s 2025 electoral calendar includes:

Delhi Legislative Assembly (Feb 5, 2025): BJP reclaimed power with 48 out of 70 seats after 60.5% turnout; anti-corruption narratives- especially around AAP’s “Sheesh Mahal” liquor policy—dominated the campaign [ABP Live+1https://www.oneindia.com/+1Wikipedia](https://www.oneindia.com/+1Wikipedia).

Bihar Assembly (Oct–Nov 2025): All 243 seats will be contested. The BJP-JD(U) “NDA” faces off against the INDIA bloc led by RJD. Voters are responding to an EC audit revealing ~3.57 million unverified voters (4.5% of electorate), with a verification deadline in late July [The Economic Times](https://www.economic-times.com).

State election schedule: Beyond Bihar, key elections for Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Puducherry, and Uttarakhand will take place through 2026 <https://www.oneindia.com/+1https://www.oneindia.com/+1>.

Psychological Dimensions in Upcoming Elections

1) Efficacy and Reforms

Initiatives like mobile e-voting in Bihar by women, elderly, and migrants- showing over 70% uptake—boost voters’ sense of agency [Wikipedia+1Daily Fresh Blogs+1](https://www.dailyfreshblogs.com). However, concerns about the EC’s voter roll purging have generated

anxiety, especially among marginalised groups fearing disenfranchisement.

2) Emotions and Campaign Dynamics

In Delhi, anti-corruption messaging built frustration-driven turnout, reinforcing distrust yet sparking mobilization [The Times of India+7Wikipedia+7The Times of India+7](https://www.thetimesofindia.com). In Bihar, promises like 125 free electricity units from Nitish Kumar and a BJP campaign song (“Aage badhta rahe Bihar”) tap into emotions ranging from pride to pragmatic hope [The Times of India+1The Times of India+1](https://www.thetimesofindia.com).

3) Trust in Institutions

The EC’s efforts- including addressing missing voters and a special roll revision (“SIR”) in Bihar—reflect a commitment to integrity, yet also sow suspicion about bias [The Economic Times](https://www.theeconomic-times.com). Balancing outreach with legal fairness is critical to maintaining public confidence.

4) Identity, Polarization, and Alliances

Voters are increasingly aware of identity-driven politics: Bihar’s INDIA bloc reawakens regional pride by casting itself against “Delhi proxy rule” [Daily Fresh Blogs+1The Economic Times+1](https://www.dailyfreshblogs.com).

In Tamil Nadu and Kerala local elections, BJP aims to challenge regional narratives using central appeals [Daily Fresh Blogs](https://www.dailyfreshblogs.com).

These dynamics shape a psychological space where allegiance intertwines with Elections in transitional democracies are not just administrative exercises; they are deeply human and emotional experiences. In regions where democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian tendencies, voter behaviour is influenced as much by fear and distrust as it is by hope and civic pride. This article explores the psychological dimensions of voting in such contexts, using the 2025 Bihar Legislative Assembly elections as a central case study. We examine how emotions, identity, trust, and perceptions of institutional fairness shape voter participation, comparing India’s democratic experience with other countries such as Russia, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States. This humanized analysis sheds light on how elections are experienced not only as political acts but also as acts of belonging, resistance, and survival.

Comparative Electoral Psychology in Democratic and Pseudo-Democratic Regimes

Electoral psychology, a subfield of political psychology, explores how individual and group-level psychological processes influence electoral behavior. Voters do not engage in elections in a vacuum; their choices are shaped by their perceptions of legitimacy, their feelings about political actors, their trust in institutions, and their sense of inclusion or exclusion.

In full democratic regimes like Canada, Germany, or New Zealand, electoral participation is often marked by high political efficacy and institutional trust. Citizens in these countries tend to vote based on policy preferences, ideological alignment, or a sense of civic duty. Campaigns in these systems often emphasize policy debates, candidate

qualifications, and national development agendas. The emotional tone of elections tends to be more moderate, with anxiety and fear playing lesser roles.

By contrast, in pseudo-democratic or hybrid regimes-countries that hold elections but fail to meet democratic standards- voter psychology is frequently marked by distrust, fear, and strategic compliance. In Russia, for example, elections occur regularly but are often manipulated through state-controlled media, intimidation, and legal restrictions on opposition candidates. Similarly, in Turkey, under Erdoğan's increasingly centralized rule, voters are exposed to polarizing narratives that blend religious identity with nationalism.

Voters in such regimes often vote for incumbents not out of ideological affinity but out of fear of repercussions, desire for stability, or hopelessness about change. This phenomenon, called "contained contestation" (Schedler, 2002), refers to the constrained spaces within which citizens express political preference, often balancing symbolic dissent with strategic silence.

India, the world's largest democracy, straddles these categories. It boasts robust electoral participation, a vibrant multiparty system, and a constitution that guarantees universal adult franchise. Yet, recent trends- such as media consolidation, erosion of institutional independence, and identity-based mobilization- have raised concerns about democratic backsliding. India exemplifies a transitional democracy—one where democratic rituals persist even as their substantive quality is questioned.

Bihar is one of India's most politically aware and electorally active states. With a population exceeding 120 million and over 79 million registered voters, it is often seen as a microcosm of India's broader socio-political landscape. Its elections are known for high voter turnout, complex caste-based calculations, youth-driven mobilizations, and shifting party loyalties.

Scheduled for October–November 2025, the upcoming Bihar Legislative Assembly elections are occurring at a critical juncture. The ruling BJP–JD(U) alliance faces the opposition INDIA bloc, composed of the RJD, Congress, and Left parties. Beyond this political binary, several non-electoral dynamics are shaping voter psychology:

- A controversial voter roll revision affecting over 3.57 million voters
- Introduction of app-based mobile voting in select urban areas
- Caste census data triggering renewed demands for social justice
- Emotional campaign strategies anchored in pride, fear, and resentment

These dynamics reflect a broader transformation in how voters think and feel about elections. In Bihar, electoral participation is as much a statement of identity and survival as it is a political choice.

In July 2025, the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced that over 3.57 million voter records in Bihar were unverifiable or duplicated. A Special Intensive Revision

(SIR) was launched, giving voters until July 25 to prove their eligibility.

For millions, this was more than a bureaucratic task—it was a crisis of identity.

"I work in Mumbai, but I've voted in every election from my village. Suddenly they say I don't exist?"

— *Rakesh Kumar, 28, migrant worker from Gaya*

Voter roll purges in India disproportionately affect the marginalized migrants, the rural poor, linguistic minorities, and religious communities. The psychological impact is severe: voters feel invisible, powerless, and disrespected. Civil society groups in Bihar reported that many voters were unsure of the appeal process, and that the process lacked transparency.

This experience is not unique to India. In the United States, voter ID laws and purges have been criticized for suppressing minority voters. In Russia, opposition-dense urban districts face systematic disqualification. Across regimes, disenfranchisement- whether explicit or bureaucratic-undermines not only political rights but psychological inclusion.

In Bihar, the controversy became a key campaign issue. The opposition framed it as "administrative disenfranchisement"; the ruling parties emphasized the need to clean up voter lists. But for ordinary voters, the message was clear: "You are not important enough to be counted unless you fight for it."

In a first for Indian state elections, Bihar introduced blockchain-based mobile voting in selected municipalities. The system allowed verified voters- especially migrants, persons with disabilities, and senior citizens—to cast their vote via a secure smartphone app using facial recognition.

This initiative, while applauded for inclusivity, revealed a psychological and digital divide. Among educated, urban, and tech-savvy voters, mobile voting enhanced internal political efficacy- the belief that one's actions can influence politics.

"Voting from Delhi while working- I finally felt like a citizen again."

— *Shahana Begum, 52, originally from Patna*

But in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, limited smartphone access, digital illiteracy, and fears of surveillance created apprehension. Several voters refused to use the app, fearing data misuse or vote manipulation.

This mirrors international trends. In Brazil, electronic voting increased access but raised fears of tampering. In Estonia, online voting is common but relies heavily on digital infrastructure and trust in cybersecurity. In India, where digital literacy is uneven, mobile voting may empower some while inadvertently excluding others.

The psychological challenge lies not in the technology itself but in how it is perceived, introduced, and explained. Without

trust, even the most secure systems will fail to enhance democratic participation.

The psychological tone of election campaigns has shifted globally- from reasoned debate to emotional spectacle. Bihar is no exception.

BJP-JD(U): Pride and Progress

The NDA's campaign centered on infrastructure, nationalism, and Prime Minister Modi's charisma. Songs like "*Aage Badhta Rahe Bihar*" featured images of roads, factories, youth, and the Indian flag. The emotional pitch was one of pride and aspiration.

"I feel proud when I see development. Our village finally has electricity."

— *Geeta Devi, 41, Araria*

INDIA Bloc: Injustice and Memory

The opposition framed its campaign around injustice—voter deletions, unemployment, farmer distress, and caste inequality. Their tone invoked resentment, betrayal, and collective memory.

"My father marched for reservation in the '90s. We're still waiting for dignity."

— *Pramod Yadav, 25, Nalanda*

These emotional appeals reflect global patterns. In Turkey, Erdoğan's campaigns fuse religious nationalism with fear of "foreign enemies." In Brazil, Bolsonaro mobilized moral panic. In the U.S., Trump leveraged nostalgia, grievance, and fear.

Emotional politics shapes voter motivation. Research by Marcus et al. (2000) shows that fear increases political attentiveness, while enthusiasm reinforces loyalty. In Bihar, both emotions were used strategically- to mobilize, polarize, and sometimes paralyze.

The release of India's 2023 caste census revealed that OBCs, EBCs, and Dalits- though forming a demographic majority- lag behind in education, jobs, and health access. The psychological impact was immediate: recognition of historical neglect.

This aligns with international trends. In Bolivia, Indigenous voters supported Evo Morales as an act of historical redress. In the U.S., Black voter mobilization is often rooted in civil rights memory. In South Africa, ANC support persists partly as gratitude for liberation.

In Bihar, caste-based voting is not regressive- it is rational and symbolic. It reflects lived experience and the desire to be seen in policymaking.

Trust in Institutions: Fragile but Functional

Voters across Bihar express selective trust. They believe in the vote, but not always in the system. While most trust the electoral process to be peaceful and accessible, fewer trust it to be fair, unbiased, or incorruptible.

The Election Commission, for instance, has received praise for expanding polling booths and using real-time dashboards. But its inaction on hate speech and delayed roll verification decisions have drawn criticism.

This ambivalent trust is a hallmark of transitional regimes. In Russia, voters participate in clearly skewed elections because they distrust alternatives. In India, the act of voting itself sustains democratic belief, even as other institutions falter. What does voting mean to a citizen in Bihar- or in any transitional democracy?

It is not a single answer, but a complex mix:

- Emotional: Voting is about pride, fear, hope, anger.
- Strategic: Voters assess who will deliver benefits or prevent harm.
- Ritualistic: Voting is habit, obligation, community participation.

These motivations coexist. A Dalit woman may vote for pride, because her community expects it, and because she fears the consequences of the ruling party's return. Each motivation matters- not just for outcomes, but for understanding why democracy persists. The 2025 Bihar elections reveal that democracy is not just a structure- it is a feeling, a memory, and a psychological act. Voters in Bihar are not naïve- they are navigating a system that inspires both faith and doubt, hope and fear.

Their participation- despite missing names, broken promises, and emotional exhaustion- is itself a form of political courage. In a world where democracy is under threat, understanding how people feel about elections is as important as knowing how they vote. Electoral psychology, especially in transitional contexts, reminds us that democracy is ultimately about the people- not just as voters, but as humans with emotions, identities, and dreams.

3. Conclusion

Voters across Bihar express selective trust. They believe in the vote, but not always in the system. While most trust the electoral process to be peaceful and accessible, fewer trust it to be fair, unbiased, or incorruptible. The release of India's 2023 caste census revealed that OBCs, EBCs, and Dalits- though forming a demographic majority- lag behind in education, jobs, and health access. The psychological impact was immediate: recognition of historical neglect.

In Bihar, caste identity is not just a social category- it is a political emotion. Voting becomes a way to correct historical wrongs, assert collective dignity, and demand accountability.

"Voting is our answer to silence. They ignored us for decades. Now we speak through ballots." - *Rekha Paswan, schoolteacher, Samastipur* This aligns with international trends. In Bolivia, Indigenous voters supported Evo Morales as an act of historical redress. In the U.S., Black voter mobilization is often rooted in civil rights memory. In South Africa, ANC support persists partly as gratitude for liberation. In Bihar, caste-based voting is not regressive—it is rational and symbolic. It reflects lived experience and the desire to be

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