



POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN A ONE-PARTY DOMINANT SYSTEM: THE CASE OF MADHYA PRADESH

Dr. Indu Pandey

Supervisor and Guide, Department of Political Science & Public Administration, IEHE, Bhopal

Manish Dubey

Research Scholar & Assistant Professor, Govt. SGS PG College, Ganj Basoda

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at political participation in Madhya Pradesh (MP), a large central Indian state where one party has often held power. After independence, the Indian National Congress (INC) was a major player in the state's politics. However, since the early 2000s, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has become the main force, influencing governance and elections.

The study examines how this long-term dominance affects political engagement. It focuses on voter turnout, party mobilization, and citizen participation in both electoral and non-electoral activities. The research questions whether dominance leads to stability and consistent policy or restricts real competition and reduces the perceived impact of participation. It pays special attention to voting trends, changes in vote share, and the role of opposition parties in supporting democratic competition. The paper also looks at trust in institutions, campaign tactics, and civic activism in shaping participatory democracy. By placing Madhya Pradesh within wider theories of dominant-party systems, the analysis aims to understand how democratic participation changes when political power is held by one party over time.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation, which includes citizens taking part in electoral and non-electoral activities, is essential for democratic governance. It covers voting, campaigning, party membership, protest movements, civic engagement, and public discussions.¹ In theory, a competitive multiparty system improves participation by giving voters real choices, promoting policy debate, and encouraging accountability. When citizens believe that their vote can make a difference, they are more likely to become actively involved in political processes.²

However, in a one-party dominant context, where a single political party keeps winning elections and controls government institutions, participation dynamics may be different from what we expect in a pluralistic system.³ Even though elections still take place and opposition parties are present, the predictability of outcomes can influence voter motivation, campaign strategies, and the overall culture of political engagement. This dominance can create political stability and consistent administration, but it can also limit the

effectiveness of opposition and lower perceptions of electoral competitiveness.⁴

Madhya Pradesh (MP) provides a strong example of these dynamics. Historically, the Indian National Congress (INC) held power in the decades after independence. Since the early 2000s, though, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has become the main political force in both state assembly and national (Lok Sabha) elections. This shift has influenced current patterns of political participation.⁵

Historical and Political Context of Madhya Pradesh

Early Era: Congress Dominance (1950s–1990s)

In the first decades after India's independence, the Indian National Congress (INC) was the main political force in Madhya Pradesh.⁶ The party consistently won decisive legislative victories and influenced the state's early administration and development. Leaders like Ravishankar Shukla provided essential leadership after the 1952 elections. In the 1952 and 1957 Assembly elections, the INC secured overwhelming majorities, winning 194 of 232 seats in 1952 and 232 of 288 in 1957. This clearly showed its dominance.⁷



Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the party faced internal conflicts and some electoral losses, but it remained the key player in political competition. Even when non-Congress governments appeared briefly, they found it hard to maintain power for long. Thus, until the early 1990s, Madhya Pradesh primarily mirrored the national trend of Congress dominance in a competitive but uneven party system.

Rise of Bipolar Contest: BJP's Emergence (1990s–Present)

By the 1990s, the political scene changed to a two-party contest between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP built on the earlier presence of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. It expanded its organizational base and appeal, especially among urban and middle-class voters.⁸

A key moment came in the 2003 Assembly election when the BJP won 173 seats while the Congress fell to 38 seats. This marked the start of a long period of BJP dominance. The party held power in the 2008 and 2013 Assembly elections, strengthening its position through steady leadership and focus on welfare-oriented strategies.⁹

The 2018 Assembly election briefly changed this trend, as Congress became the single largest party and formed the government with outside support. However, political shifts and defections soon brought the BJP back to power, reinforcing its dominant status.

More recently, in the 2024 general elections, the BJP won all 29 Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh with nearly 60% of the vote. This result had not been seen since Congress's victory in 1984. These events highlight a one-party dominant structure where competition exists, but electoral results consistently favour one main party.¹⁰

Theoretical Framework: One-Party Dominant Systems

A one-party dominant system is different from authoritarian or single-party regimes. In these systems, regular elections take place, opposition parties operate legally, and democratic institutions function formally.¹¹

However, one political party consistently wins elections over a long period, shaping governance and public policy continuously. Political scientists refer to this as a competitive but uneven system, where changes in power are possible in theory but limited in practice.¹²

Scholarly literature outlines several features of dominant-party systems. First, there often is less competitiveness in key elections. The dominant party's repeated victories create a sense of inevitability. Second, structural advantages usually favour the ruling party. These include stronger organisational networks, better resource use, effective party systems, and deeper connections within communities. Third, dominance can influence how voters think. It can shape their expectations about outcomes, affecting their motivation and views on political effectiveness.¹³

Such systems can bring both stability and democratic concerns. On one hand, long-term dominance can lead to policy continuity and administrative consistency. On the other hand, it may weaken opposition parties, limit meaningful challenges, and reduce accountability.

The effect of a dominant-party system on political participation depends on how competitive elections seem to voters and whether citizens believe their involvement through voting, campaigning, or civic activism—can genuinely impact political outcomes.¹⁴

Political Participation in Madhya Pradesh

Political participation in Madhya Pradesh shows a complex relationship between one party's dominance and ongoing democratic engagement.¹⁵ Although one party has often held a structural advantage in recent decades, citizen involvement in both voting and civic activities remains strong.¹⁶

Voter Turnout: Trends

Voter turnout is a key measure of political participation. In Madhya Pradesh, turnout in Assembly elections has generally been high and has even increased in recent years. The 2023 state Assembly elections saw a turnout of



about 76 percent, one of the highest in the state's history.¹⁷ These numbers indicate that the dominance of a single party has not led to voter disinterest.

High levels of turnout can be linked to several factors, such as effective party mobilization, competitive local races, community and caste ties, welfare-focused campaign strategies, and politics centred around specific issues.¹⁸ Both the dominant party and the opposition are active in grassroots campaigning, door-to-door outreach, and promoting voter awareness. In rural areas especially, elections are tied to expectations of development, local leadership, and identity-based connections.¹⁹ Therefore, rather than reducing participation, the bipolar nature of politics in Madhya Pradesh often keeps voter enthusiasm alive.

These trends challenge the idea that one-party dominance automatically leads to lower electoral engagement. Instead, participation stays strong when voters believe their choices matter at the local level, even if the overall trends appear predictable.²⁰

Electoral Competition and Party Dynamics

Despite periods of dominance, electoral competition in Madhya Pradesh continues to influence political participation. The 2018 Assembly election serves as a key example. The Indian National Congress became the largest party and briefly formed the government.²¹ However, defections and political shifts soon brought the Bharatiya Janata Party back to power. This election showed that change is still possible within the system.²²

Smaller regional parties and independent candidates also join elections and sometimes affect vote margins and campaign stories. Although they rarely turn their presence into significant legislative wins, they help define issues and create local political debates.²³

However, prolonged dominance can limit real competition. When electoral margins are consistently wide, some voters especially those who support the opposition may feel their influence is small. Over time, this feeling can

impact their political effectiveness and trust in democracy.²⁴

Participation Beyond Voting

Political participation in Madhya Pradesh goes beyond just voting. Party membership drives, youth and student wings, internal leadership contests, civil society activism, and protest movements are all part of the participation landscape.²⁵ Youth politics in major parties shows efforts to develop new leaders and grow their organizational bases. Grassroots networks are crucial for keeping people engaged between election cycles.²⁶

At the same time, there have been allegations about how electoral rolls are managed and about campaign practices. These issues sometimes spark debates about trust in institutions. Such controversies can either inspire citizens to be active and watchful or make them sceptical and less involved.²⁷

Overall, political participation in Madhya Pradesh remains lively and diverse. Even within a system dominated by one party, citizens still take part through elections, party structures, and civic activities. This shows that democratic participation exists alongside imbalances in power.²⁸

Challenges to Political Participation

While political participation in Madhya Pradesh is strong in numbers, several structural and perceptual challenges impact its quality and inclusiveness. These challenges mainly involve trust in institutions, electoral integrity, and access to trustworthy political options within a dominant-party system.²⁹

Institutional Trust and Electoral Integrity

Voter confidence in the integrity of electoral processes is essential for democratic participation. In Madhya Pradesh, as in other Indian states, opposition leaders often allege that voter rolls are manipulated. They raise concerns about irregular additions or deletions of names and the presence of duplicate or "fake" voters.³⁰ These claims have led to public debate. Even when institutions contest or investigate these claims, they can still create uncertainty among some voters.³¹



Institutional transparency, timely clarification from election authorities, and accessible systems for addressing grievances are crucial for maintaining trust. When voters feel that electoral institutions are fair and responsive, participation increases. On the other hand, ongoing doubts about fairness can undermine political efficacy, or the belief that an individual's participation can truly influence outcomes.³²

Discussion

In Madhya Pradesh, the main parties, whether Congress in the earlier decades or the BJP in more recent years, have influenced political participation in complex and changing ways. Strong and often high voter turnout in Assembly and Lok Sabha elections shows that citizens still see elections as valuable events, even when one party wins repeatedly. This indicates that dominance has not led to widespread voter disengagement.

At the same time, a mostly two-party contest between these major parties has sharpened competition in local elections. Even if statewide results often favour one party, local races are still closely contested, keeping voter mobilisation and campaign efforts strong.

Additionally, factors like institutional trust, grassroots networks, leadership appeal, and welfare-focused strategies play a crucial role in the quality of participation. Thus, political participation in Madhya Pradesh is not only a story of dominance; it is influenced by competitive narratives, local economic issues, and the overall institutional context.

Conclusion

Madhya Pradesh's electoral scene shows that a one-party dominant system can exist alongside active citizen engagement. High voter turnout in Assembly and Lok Sabha elections shows that people continue to take part in formal democratic processes. The competitive two-party structure, mainly between the two main parties, keeps electoral campaigns intense, issue-focused, and connected to local communities. Even when one party often wins a majority, contests at the constituency level

frequently remain close, which maintains voter interest and involvement.

Nonetheless, we should look at participation not just in numbers but also in quality. The strength of public debate, inclusion of marginalised groups, internal party democracy, and the transparency of electoral institutions are important for assessing democratic health. Views on fairness, equal access to political opportunities, and the strength of opposing voices greatly affect people's sense of political effectiveness.

Therefore, while dominant-party politics in Madhya Pradesh has not stopped participation, its long-term effects on accountability, representation, and democratic diversity deserve further academic focus and research.

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