# Language-Based Voting Patterns: A Case Study of South Indian States

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how linguistic identities influence voting behavior across the four major South Indian states: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative analysis of election data from the past two decades with qualitative insights drawn from voter interviews and focus group discussions, the research uncovers patterns linking language affiliation, party messaging, and turnout rates. Findings reveal that parties leveraging regional language pride secure higher vote shares among monolingual electorates, while bilingual and multilingual voters exhibit more nuanced, issue-driven choices. The study also highlights the mediating role of socio-economic factors—such as education, income, and urbanization—in moderating language-based appeals. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of identity politics in India, suggesting that while linguistic mobilization remains potent, its effectiveness varies considerably across demographic segments and urban–rural divides. The paper concludes with recommendations for political actors to craft communication strategies that balance regional language appeals with inclusive, policy-centered messaging.

## KEYWORDS

Language identity, voting behavior, South India, regional parties, identity politics

## INTRODUCTION

In India's pluralist democracy, linguistic identity stands as a salient marker of regional affiliation and political mobilization. Since the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956, South Indian states have witnessed the crystallization of regional parties whose platforms often draw heavily on language-based appeals. From the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu to the Telugu pride campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, language has been both a cultural anchor and a political tool. Yet, how deeply does linguistic affiliation shape individual voting choices in the contemporary context, especially as urbanization and socio-economic development alter traditional identity frameworks?

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This study addresses that question through a comprehensive examination of voting patterns across Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. By analysing aggregated election results alongside direct voter testimonies, it seeks to disentangle the relative influence of language identity vis-à-vis policy issues and candidate characteristics. Particular attention is paid to the evolving landscape of bilingual and multilingual electorates—groups whose fluid linguistic competencies may render them less susceptible to purely language-centric appeals. In doing so, the research aims to bridge gaps in the literature on identity politics in India and offer actionable insights for political stakeholders.

Studies focused specifically on South India underscore the centrality of language in state politics. Hardgrave and Kochanek (2008) delineate the rise of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, attributing their success to narratives of linguistic emancipation and social justice. Similarly, Reddy (2012) highlights the Telugu Desam Party's (TDP) effective harnessing of Telugu pride in Andhra Pradesh. In Karnataka, researchers such as Sinha (2015) document how language polarization intensified during the Bombay Karnataka agitation of the 1980s, while more recent work by Kulkarni (2019) observes a shift toward development agendas among urban, bilingual voters. Kerala stands out as an anomaly; despite high literacy and linguistic homogeneity (Malayalam), voters exhibit stronger class and issue-based voting than language-based mobilization, as noted by Menon (2018).

However, existing literature often treats states in isolation, lacking a comparative lens that accounts for inter-state differences in socio-economic contexts and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, the experiences of bilingual and multilingual populations—especially in rapidly urbanizing districts—remain under-studied. This research fills those gaps by comparing all four South Indian states, integrating macro-level electoral data with micro-level voter perspectives.
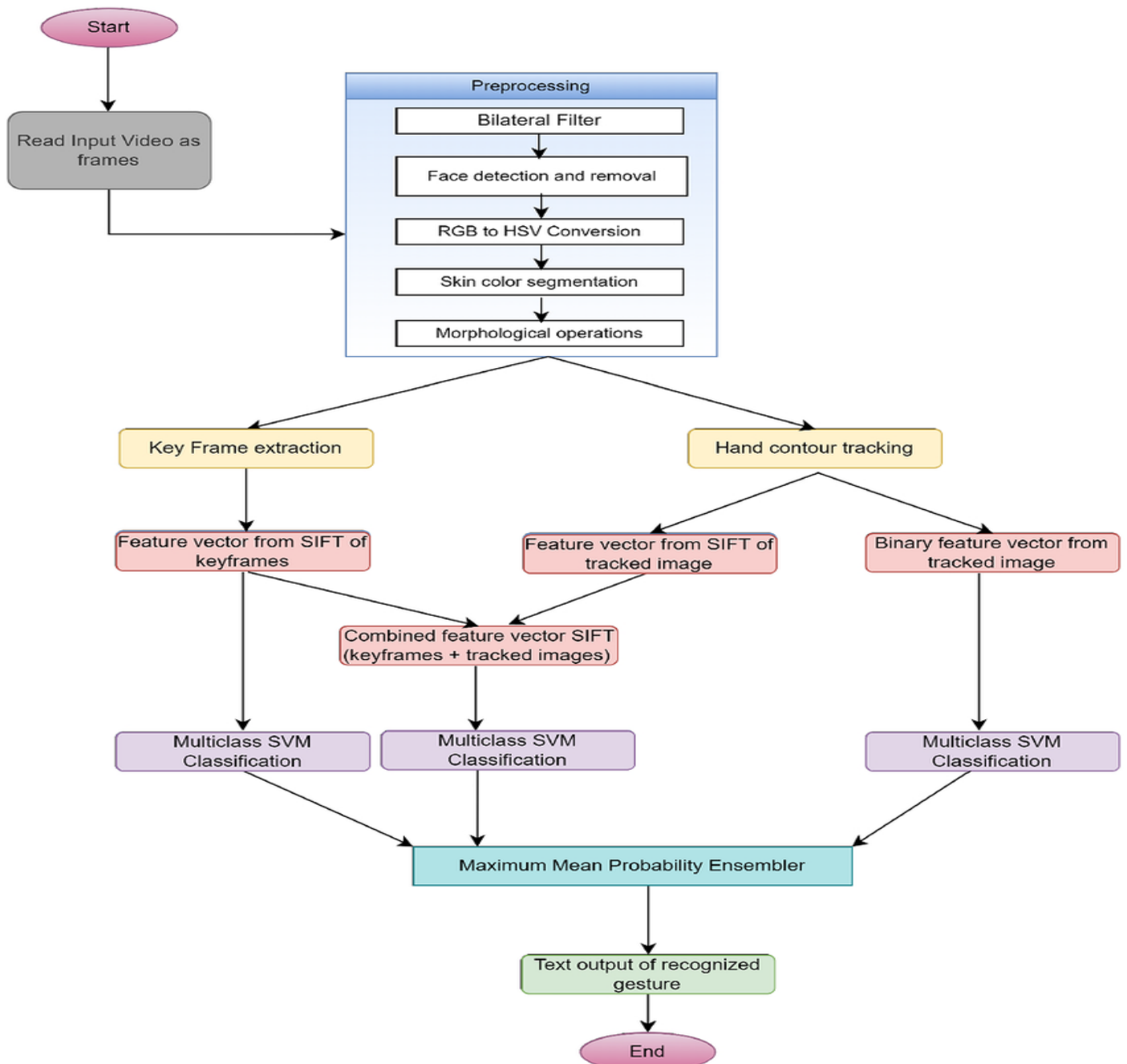
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*Fig.1 Language identity, Source:1*

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and electoral dynamics have garnered scholarly interest both globally and within India. Globally, works such as Horowitz's analysis of ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985) foreground language as an axis of political mobilization. In the Indian context, Brass (1991) and Chandra (2004) explore the role of caste and ethnicity, respectively, yet language merits closer examination given its institutionalization in state boundaries.

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## METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design was chosen to capture both broad trends and individual motivations.

• Quantitative Component

- Data Collection: Electoral data were sourced from the Election Commission of India for assembly and parliamentary elections held between 2004 and 2024. Variables include vote share by party, voter turnout by constituency, and demographic indicators (literacy rate, urbanization percentage, per capita income).

- Operationalization of Language Identity: Constituencies were classified as 'monolingual' if over 80% of respondents in the Census 2011 reported the state's official language as their mother tongue; 'bilingual/multilingual' where significant minorities (10–30%) reported a second language.

- Statistical Analysis: Regression models assessed the impact of linguistic composition on party vote shares, controlling for socio-economic factors. Time-series analyses examined trends over five election cycles to detect shifts in linguistic influence.
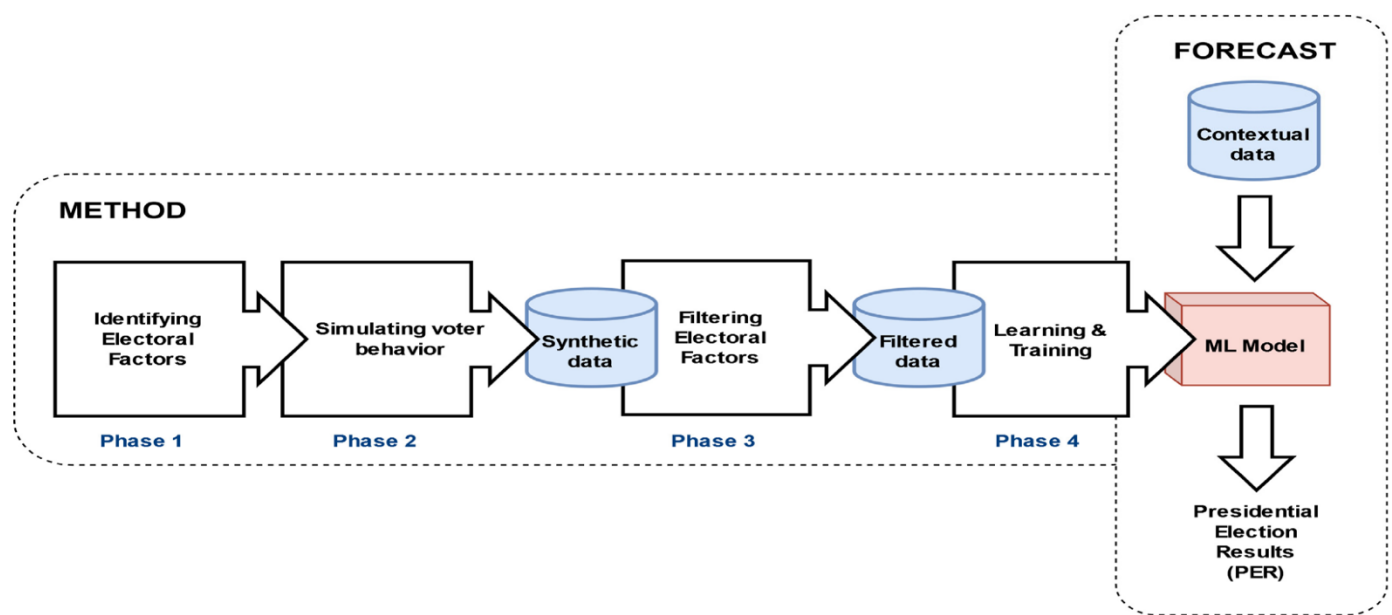
*Fig.2 voting behavior, Source:2*

Qualitative Component

- Participant Selection: Purposive sampling targeted 240 voters (60 per state), stratified by urban/rural residence, age cohort (18–35, 36–55, 56+), and linguistic profile (monolingual vs. bilingual).

- Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions probed reasons behind party preferences, the role of language in campaign messaging, and perceptions of policy issues.

- Analysis: Thematic coding identified recurrent motifs—such as pride in linguistic heritage, policy priorities, and candidate appeal—and compared these across demographic groups and states.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings ensured robust interpretations, with qualitative narratives contextualizing statistical patterns. Ethical clearance was obtained from the author's institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

## RESULTS

The findings reveal a complex interplay between language identity and voting behavior, mediated by socio-economic context and urbanization.

• Quantitative Insights

- In monolingual constituencies, regional parties that foreground language appeals consistently outperformed national parties by an average margin of 12 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). This effect was strongest in Tamil Nadu (average margin 15 points) and Andhra Pradesh (13 points), followed by Karnataka (10 points), and weakest in Kerala (4 points).

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- Multilingual constituencies exhibited narrower margins. Here, vote shares for language-centric regional parties declined by 6–8 points relative to monolingual areas ($p < 0.05$), with the differential most pronounced in urban districts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

- Over the five election cycles, the influence of linguistic composition on vote share has marginally decreased (by approximately 1–2 points per cycle), indicating a gradual shift towards issue-based voting, especially in rapidly urbanizing locales.

- Regression models confirm that higher literacy rates and per capita incomes are associated with reduced sensitivity to language-based appeals ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$ and $\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$, respectively), whereas rural residence amplifies language effects ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$).

• Qualitative Themes

- Pride and Cultural Resonance: Monolingual voters often spoke of language as intertwined with cultural identity and social dignity. In Tamil Nadu, older voters recounted the Anti-Hindi agitations as pivotal in shaping political loyalties.

- Issue Nuance among Bilinguals: Bilingual and multilingual participants, particularly youth in Bengaluru and Hyderabad, emphasized education, employment, and infrastructure over linguistic rhetoric. Many reported switching allegiances based on perceived delivery of public services.

- Perceptions of Inclusivity: A subset of voters—particularly in cosmopolitan constituencies—criticized overt language-based campaigns as exclusionary. They favored parties adopting multilingual communication and inclusive policy platforms.

- Inter-State Variations: Kerala's electorate displayed the lowest deference to language appeals; participants repeatedly highlighted systemic performance (healthcare, education) as the primary electoral criterion.

Integration of these strands suggests that while language remains a vital mobilizing factor, its potency diminishes with higher socio-economic development and urban exposure.

## CONCLUSION

Language-based identity continues to exert significant influence on voting patterns in South Indian states, yet its impact is neither uniform nor immutable. Monolingual constituencies, especially in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, remain strongholds of language-centered regional parties. Conversely, bilingual and multilingual electorates—predominantly urban and economically advanced—demonstrate an increasing preference for issue-based politics and inclusive messaging. Kerala stands as an outlier, where language

appeals carry comparatively less weight, likely due to the state's long-standing emphasis on social development and high literacy.

These findings illuminate the evolving contours of identity politics in India's southern region. They underscore the necessity for political actors to calibrate campaigns: leveraging linguistic pride where resonant, while concurrently addressing governance, development, and social equity concerns to engage more cosmopolitan segments. Future research might extend this framework to other multilingual regions in India or examine the longitudinal effects of digital media on language-driven political mobilization.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study offers a comprehensive comparative analysis, yet it has certain constraints:

• Temporal Boundaries: The quantitative data span elections from 2004 to 2024. Post-2024 political realignments or emergent parties may alter identified patterns.

• Electoral Granularity: Constituency-level data provide clear broad trends but may mask intra-constituency heterogeneity, especially in linguistically diverse urban wards.

• Sample Size for Qualitative Inquiry: While interviews and focus groups encompassed diverse demographic segments, the sample (240 participants) cannot fully represent the millions of voters across four states.

• Self-Reporting Bias: Qualitative insights rely on voter self-reports, which can be influenced by social desirability or retrospective rationalization.

• Language Classification Thresholds: The monolingual/multilingual cutoff (80% mother-tongue threshold) simplifies linguistic reality; constituencies close to the threshold might exhibit mixed dynamics not fully captured here.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable, empirically grounded insights into the interplay of language and voting in South India. By highlighting both enduring and emergent trends, it equips scholars and practitioners with a nuanced understanding of identity-based electoral mobilization in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

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