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CHANGING POLITICAL BEHAVIOR OF THE ELECTORATE IN WEST BENGAL (2011–2016): A STUDY OF ELECTORAL TRENDS AND POLITICAL REALIGNMENT

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>West Bengal, Political Behaviour, Voting Behaviour, Electoral Politics, Trinamool Congress, Left Front, Political Realignment, Assembly Elections, Voter Participation.</i>	Because of its long history of competitive party politics, ideological mobilization, robust grassroots organization, and high voter turnout, West Bengal has historically been one of India's most politically significant states. The 2011 and 2016 Assembly elections were a significant turning point in the state's political development. The All India Trinamool Congress (AITC/TMC), led by Mamata Banerjee, won the 2011 election, ending the Left Front's unbroken 34-year hegemony. The 2016 election showed that the political shift started in 2011 had evolved into a major electoral realignment trend rather than just an anti-incumbency incident. By analyzing electoral trends, party competitiveness, voter preferences, leadership, development, welfare, political identity, and the shifting social bases of political parties, this article investigates the shifting political behaviour of the West Bengali electorate between 2011 and 2016. The electoral Commission of India data, academic literature, books, journal articles, and electoral studies are among the secondary sources on which the study is mostly based. According to the report, there was a shift at this time from a party structure that was mostly cantered on the Left to one that was cantered on the TMC. Organizational weariness, shifting societal norms, disputes over industrialization and land



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	acquisition, and the failure to adequately address anti-incumbency sentiment were all linked to the Left's decline. At the same time, the TMC successfully combined leadership-centred politics, anti-Left mobilisation, welfare-oriented governance and grassroots political organisation. The 2016 election further confirmed the consolidation of this realignment, although the rise of the BJP as an emerging political force indicated the beginning of another transformation in the state's electoral politics.
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Introduction

Because it explains how people engage in political processes and choose between rival political parties and politicians, political behaviour is a crucial topic of political science. There is more than one factor that influences voting behaviour. Political, social, economic, ideological, psychological, and institutional factors all play a role in shaping it. State-level elections offer a crucial chance to study differences in political behaviour in a federal democracy like India since voter selections are often influenced by regional political cultures and party systems. West Bengal offers a particularly significant example for examining evolving political behaviour. Between 1977 and 2011, the state was continuously ruled by the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]. This period marked one of the longest stretches in a democratic system during which a Left coalition maintained continuous electoral rule. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Left's political dominance had started to decline. The 2009 Lok Sabha election, and more significantly, the 2011 Assembly election, signalled the rise of a new political landscape.

The 2011 Assembly election was a watershed in West Bengal politics. The Trinamool Congress won 184 of the 294 Assembly seats, while the Congress won 42. The Left Front was reduced to 62 seats. The election therefore ended the 34-year uninterrupted rule of the Left Front. The election was also characterised by exceptionally high voter participation, with turnout reported at approximately 84.33 percent.

However, the political importance of 2011 cannot be grasped simply as a shift in government. It signalled a significant change in voter preferences and the social and political foundations upon which parties compete. The 2016 Assembly election offered a chance to assess whether the 2011 outcome reflected a short-term backlash against incumbents or signalled a more lasting shift in voter alignment. The TMC subsequently won 211 seats and raised its vote share to about 44.9 percent, whereas the Left and Congress, despite running together as an alliance, won only 76 seats combined. The BJP also saw its vote share rise to about 10.2 percent, though it still held only a limited number of seats electorally. Thus, the period 2011–2016 represents an important transitional phase in the political history of West Bengal. This paper seeks to analyse the changing political behaviour of the electorate during this period and to understand the factors responsible for the emerging political realignment.



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Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the changing political behaviour of the electorate in West Bengal between 2011 and 2016.
2. To analyse the major electoral trends in the 2011 and 2016 Assembly elections.
3. To examine the decline of the Left Front and the rise and consolidation of the Trinamool Congress.
4. To identify the major factors influencing voter preferences during the period.
5. To analyse the role of leadership, development, welfare and political mobilisation in electoral choice.
6. To assess the nature of political realignment in West Bengal during 2011–2016.
7. To examine the emergence of the BJP as an alternative political force during the period.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

- What major changes occurred in the political behaviour of West Bengal's electorate between 2011 and 2016?
- What factors contributed to the decline of the Left Front?
- Why did the Trinamool Congress succeed in consolidating its electoral support after 2011?
- What role did leadership and welfare-oriented politics play in determining voter preferences?
- Did the 2011 election represent temporary anti-incumbency or a deeper electoral realignment?
- How did the changing party system affect the political choices of the electorate?

Research Methodology

The study is primarily qualitative and analytical in nature. It relies on secondary sources, including Election Commission of India statistical reports, books, academic journal articles, election studies, newspapers and other published materials. The Election Commission's statistical reports provide official election data for the 2011 and 2016 West Bengal Assembly elections.

A comparative method has been adopted to examine changes between the two elections. The study focuses on electoral performance, vote share, voter participation, party competition and the broader



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socio-political factors influencing electoral behaviour. The concept of political realignment is used as the principal analytical framework.

Conceptualising Political Behaviour and Electoral Realignment

Political behavior encompasses the ways individuals and groups engage in political processes and react to political institutions, parties, leaders, and public policies. One of its most important aspects is voting behavior. Traditional views of voting behavior focus on social traits, party loyalty, and rational decision-making. In India, electoral behavior is especially intricate, as factors such as caste, class, religion, region, leadership, development, welfare benefits, local political networks, and candidate traits can all simultaneously shape voting choices. Electoral realignment describes a major and lasting shift in how voters align their political support. It could include the weakening of an established political party, the rise of a new dominant party, shifts in the social coalition backing political parties, and a reorganization of electoral competition.

The 2011 and 2016 West Bengal elections can be understood using this framework. The weakening of the Left Front, the rise of the TMC as the dominant political force, and the slow reorganization of opposition politics suggest that this period signified more than just a routine change in government.

Political Background: The Decline of Left Front Dominance

The Left Front's electoral strength in West Bengal stemmed from a robust organisational framework, ideological outreach, extensive rural connections, and policies focused on agrarian reform and decentralisation. By the 2000s, however, a number of structural issues had surfaced.

The Left Front government's effort to speed up industrialization generated friction with parts of its longstanding rural base. The disputes over land acquisition in Singur and Nandigram gained particular significance. Research has found that the government's management of these movements played a significant role in the 2011 electoral loss. Bidyut Chakrabarty contends that the 2011 outcome resulted from a blend of widespread public anger, shortcomings in addressing mass protests, and the TMC-led opposition's capacity to consolidate various anti-Left factions.

Similarly, Chatterjee and Basu contend that the emergence of the TMC was part of a wider political transformation that started prior to 2011 and was linked to shifts in the Left's social base, development approach, and ties with rural communities. Thus, the decline of the Left Front cannot be attributed solely to anti-incumbency. It showed a growing divide between the traditional political identity of the Left and evolving social expectations held by parts of the electorate.

The 2011 Assembly Election: The Beginning of Political Realignment

The 2011 Assembly election signalled a major shift in West Bengal politics. The TMC emerged as the largest party with 184 seats, while its electoral ally, the Congress, won 42 seats. Alongside its



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other alliance partner, the anti-Left coalition achieved a decisive win. The Left Front's seat count dropped to 62.

The importance of the result stemmed from the magnitude of the electoral change. The voters ousted a government that had governed the state without interruption for over thirty years. The result showed that voters' long-term party loyalty could decline if they saw a mismatch between how well the government was performing and what they expected.

The 2011 election was shaped by multiple factors. Initially, opposition to the incumbent was strong. Second, disputes over land acquisition led to discontent among parts of the rural population. Third, the TMC effectively positioned itself as the agent of change. Fourth, Mamata Banerjee's leadership offered a clear personal anchor for mobilizing opposition to the Left.

The electoral coalition supporting the TMC was also noteworthy. The party successfully drew support from rural voters, minority communities, lower-income earners, parts of the urban electorate, and those looking for an alternative to the Left. Therefore, the election showed that political behavior was growing less reliant on traditional ideological loyalties.

Changing Patterns of Political Behaviour, 2011–2016

(1) Decline of Traditional Party Loyalty

A key change was the erosion of long-standing party loyalties. The Left Front had historically drawn strength from a stable social and organizational foundation. Nevertheless, the 2011 election showed that a significant portion of voters were prepared to change their political loyalty. The decline was not merely a political loss for the CPI(M); it signalled a weakening of the organizational ties between the Left and parts of its traditional social support. Studies of West Bengal's electoral politics have found that the evolving connection between the Left's development approach and its longstanding support base plays a key role in this process.

(2) Leadership-Centred Voting

During this period, leadership grew in importance. Mamata Banerjee became the key political figure of the TMC. Her role as an opposition leader and her sustained campaign against the Left played a major part in rallying anti-Left voters. Thus, the political transformation was marked by a shift from tightly structured ideological party politics to a more leader-driven approach in electoral mobilization. This did not imply that ideology vanished entirely, but leadership grew increasingly significant as a means by which voters understood political options.

(3) Development and Governance

Development became another key factor influencing electoral behavior. The Left Front's industrialization strategy sparked political debate, especially concerning land acquisition. Voters are increasingly assessing political parties based on their capacity to provide economic opportunities,



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infrastructure, and public services. The literature on the 2011 election underscores the tension between industrialization and rural livelihood security as a key factor influencing electoral decisions.

(4) Welfare and Populist Politics

Following 2011, welfare-focused politics emerged as a key part of the TMC's political strategy. The new government highlighted several social and developmental initiatives and sought to build a political connection between the state government and various social groups. The wider body of literature is increasingly examining the TMC using the ideas of populism, welfare politics, and clientelism, while also underscoring the significance of charismatic leadership. As a result, voters were increasingly swayed not just by ideological factors, but also by their views on how responsive the government was and how accessible welfare benefits were.

(5) Political Participation

West Bengal has consistently shown strong voter turnout. In the 2011 Assembly election, turnout was around 84.33 percent, compared to about 82.66 percent in the 2016 election. Though turnout dropped slightly in 2016, involvement stayed very high. This suggests that electoral politics remained a key means of political engagement. The high turnout also indicates that the political transformation of the period extended beyond elite competition; it included widespread popular involvement.

The 2016 Assembly Election: Consolidation of the TMC

The 2016 Assembly election was pivotal in deciding whether the 2011 transformation would last. The results indicated clear signs of consolidation. In the period from 2011 to 2016, the TMC expanded its representation from 184 seats to 211 seats. Its share of the vote rose from about 38.9 percent to roughly 44.9 percent. By contrast, the Left's share of the vote dropped significantly. The Congress increased its number of seats compared to the Left but still could not undermine the TMC's dominance. The BJP saw its vote share rise to about 10.2 percent, yet it secured only three seats.

Comparative Electoral Pattern

Indicator	2011 Assembly Election	2016 Assembly Election
Total Assembly seats	294	294
TMC seats	184	211
TMC vote share	38.93%	44.91%
Left Front seats	62	32
Congress seats	42	44



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BJP seats	0	3
Approx. voter turnout	84.33%	82.66%

Source: Election Commission of India statistical data and published election analyses.

The results demonstrate that the TMC's 2011 victory was not simply a temporary rejection of the Left. By 2016, the party had substantially increased its vote share and seat tally. The electorate therefore appeared to be moving towards a new political equilibrium centred on the TMC.

Left–Congress Alliance and the Changing Opposition

The 2016 election also showed how opposition politics was evolving. The Congress and the Left Front sought to unite their electoral power in opposition to the TMC. Nevertheless, the alliance was unable to turn its collective vote share into a strong electoral campaign.

Analyses following the election indicated that the shift of votes between the Left and Congress was not balanced. Voters who had previously backed one part of the alliance did not always fully switch their support to the alliance's candidate. This matters from a political behavior standpoint because it shows that voters don't always act in line with the formal alliances created by political parties. Voters have their own preferences, identities, and strategic considerations. The collapse of the Left–Congress alliance also signalled the weakening organizational attractiveness of the Left. By 2016, the Left could no longer rally its traditional base as effectively as before.

Emergence of the BJP as an Alternative Political Force

Though the BJP held few seats during 2011–2016, its rising vote share in 2016 carried political importance. The BJP's share of the vote rose from about 4.1 percent in 2011 to roughly 10.2 percent in 2016. This development indicated that the political ground previously held by the waning Left and Congress might soon be challenged by a new political actor. The BJP's ascent during this time thus served as an early sign of a wider shift in West Bengal's opposition politics.

However, treating the BJP's 2016 performance as identical to its subsequent political expansion would be analytically unsound. Between 2011 and 2016, the TMC stayed overwhelmingly in control, and the BJP had not yet emerged as the main rival to the ruling party.

Major Determinants of Changing Electoral Behaviour

The changing political behaviour of the electorate between 2011 and 2016 can be explained through several interconnected factors.

First, anti-incumbency played a major role in the 2011 election. After more than three decades of continuous rule, sections of the electorate desired political change.



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Second, land and livelihood issues became politically significant. The controversies over Singur and Nandigram affected perceptions of the Left government's development strategy.

Third, leadership became central to electoral mobilisation. Mamata Banerjee successfully personalised the demand for political change.

Fourth, welfare and governance contributed to the consolidation of the TMC after 2011. The electorate increasingly evaluated political parties through their ability to provide tangible benefits and public services.

Fifth, social and political identity remained relevant. Different social groups did not necessarily respond uniformly to political parties, and electoral coalitions were constructed through multiple social and political identities.

Sixth, organisational networks remained crucial. Electoral behaviour is influenced not only by individual preferences but also by party workers, local leaders and grassroots political mobilisation.

Political Realignment in West Bengal

Thus, the period from 2011 to 2016 can be seen as a time of major political realignment. The key aspect of this realignment was the shift from Left Front dominance to a competitive landscape cantered around the TMC. The realignment included three linked adjustments. Initially, the Left ceased to be the dominant governing coalition. Second, the TMC shifted from being an opposition movement to becoming the main governing party. Third, the traditional opposition space grew increasingly divided among the Congress, Left, and BJP.

The 2016 election showed that the TMC had built a wider electoral coalition compared to 2011. The party's greater share of votes and increased number of seats showed that it had successfully transformed the role of opposition into a new kind of political power. Meanwhile, the political realignment had not yet been fully accomplished. The BJP's increasing vote share, alongside the ongoing roles of the Congress and the Left, showed that the state's political system was still competitive. Thus, the period should be regarded as a transitional phase rather than the culmination of a stable one-party system.

Major Findings

The study identifies the following major findings:

- The 2011 Assembly election marked a significant departure from the long-standing pattern of Left Front dominance.
- The voters showed a readiness to set aside longstanding party affiliations.
- The 2011 electoral shift was significantly influenced by anti-incumbency sentiment, disputes over land acquisition, and discontent with certain elements of Left governance.



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- Mamata Banerjee's leadership was instrumental in strengthening anti-Left political mobilization.
- The TMC successfully converted the demand for paribartan into a lasting electoral coalition.
- Welfare and governance grew to be ever more significant aspects of political competition.
- The 2016 election demonstrated that the political transformation begun in 2011 was not fleeting.
- Between 2011 and 2016, the Left saw significant declines in both its organizational structure and electoral performance.
- The Left-Congress alliance showed that formal electoral partnerships do not always ensure the transfer of voter backing.
- The BJP's increased vote share in 2016 signalled the possible start of a shift in opposition politics.

15. Conclusion

The years 2011 to 2016 mark one of the most pivotal periods of political change in modern West Bengal. The electorate shifted from a political system led by the Left Front to one cantered around the Trinamool Congress. The transformation was propelled by a mix of anti-incumbency sentiment, evolving social norms, disputes over development projects, leadership dynamics, welfare-focused politics, and shifts in the organizational capabilities of political parties.

The 2011 election marked the decisive turning point. It showed that even a deeply established and long-existing political organization could lose power if its social foundation eroded and a viable alternative arose. The TMC's success stemmed not only from widespread discontent with the Left but also from its capacity to build a wide-ranging electoral coalition cantered on the notion of political change. The 2016 election strengthened this transformation. The increase in the TMC's vote share and seats demonstrated that the party had moved beyond being merely an anti-incumbent opposition force and had become the central political force in the state. At the same time, the decline of the Left and the fragmentation of opposition politics opened political space for the BJP.

The changing political behaviour of the West Bengal electorate during 2011–2016 therefore reflects a broader transformation in the nature of state-level electoral politics in India. Voters increasingly appeared to combine traditional social identities with evaluations of leadership, governance, development and welfare. Party loyalty remained important but became more flexible. The West Bengal experience also demonstrates that electoral realignment is a gradual process in which changes in voter preferences, party organisation and political narratives interact.

In conclusion, the period 2011–2016 should be understood as a critical phase of transition from Left Front hegemony to TMC-centred political dominance. It fundamentally altered the structure of



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electoral competition in West Bengal and laid the foundations for subsequent changes in the state's party system.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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