

MY CITY, MY VOTE

Primary Study of Voter Turnout in Worli, Mumbai

Analyzes patterns of voter engagement in Mumbai, revealing gaps in awareness, turnout, and democratic participation at the local level and suggests clear steps to increase citizen participation in local municipal elections

By Ariana Singhi
Arianasinghi13@gmail.com



1.0 Voter Turnout in Local Elections – Conceptual Background

1.1 Evolution of Local Elections in India

The roots of local governance in ancient India date back a long time and even find mention in the Rig Veda . However, local governance in India owes its genesis to the establishment of municipal corporations during the British era. A Municipal Council or a Municipal Corporation is a local body responsible for administering city development and providing public amenities. Municipal Corporations are responsible for governance in larger cities, while Municipal Councils do the same in smaller towns. In India, corporations are often classified into A+, A, B, C and D categories based on population and per-capita income, as shown in national and state classification tables. The norms of population thresholds are determined by the central government. A municipal corporation may be established independently or by elevating an existing council to the status of a corporation.

The creation of Madras (Chennai) Municipal Corporation on 29 September 1688 marked the beginning of organized municipal governance in India. It was created by the East India Company under a royal charter from King James II. Corporations for Calcutta (1876) and Bombay (1888) followed. The Bombay Municipal Corporation was constituted under the *Bombay Municipal Corporation Act*, while the Delhi Municipal Council, established in 1911 after Delhi became the capital, was later upgraded to a full-fledged Municipal Corporation through an Act of Parliament on 7 April 1958.

Across India, different states employ distinct nomenclatures for these bodies: in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Haryana they are known as *Nagar Nigam*; in Maharashtra, Goa and Karnataka as *Mahanagar Palika*; in West Bengal as *Pouro Nigom*; and in Tripura as *Pur Porishod*.

1.2 Democratic Governance and Municipal Corporations

The objective of municipal governance and urban planning is to create an **effective, responsive, democratic, and accountable framework** for local administration. In India and abroad, democracy and decentralization remain the twin pillars of local governance.

Decentralization supports democracy in several ways. It brings government closer to citizens, allowing them to participate more effectively in decisions concerning local development and to identify community priorities. This process also builds democratic experience among both citizens and elected representatives. For the past many years, “participation” has been central to development discourse. Democratic governance implies citizen involvement in the **formulation, passage, and implementation** of public policy (Perry, Mosley & Day, 1992)¹.

1.3 Municipal Corporation Elections

In modern democracies, elections constitute the **formal mechanism through which citizens select representatives** to hold public office. They have been the fulcrum of democratic governance since the 17th century. As with parliamentary elections in India, elections to local bodies occur every five years, though there are times that this gets delayed. The set of issues influencing the local elections are typically different than those at the state or national level.

Following the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992)**, the **State Election Commission of Maharashtra** was constituted in 1994. It conducts elections to local bodies including *Zilla*

¹ Parry, G., Mosley, G., & Day, N. (1992). *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*. Cambridge University Press.

Parishads, Panchayat Samitis, Gram Panchayats, Municipal Councils, and Municipal Corporations. Elections to *Zilla Parishads* and *Panchayat Samitis* are usually simultaneous, while municipal elections occur every five years. Since 1994, the Maharashtra State Election Commission has conducted elections across 26 Municipal Corporations, 340 Municipal Councils and *Nagar Panchayats*, 34 *Zilla Parishads*, 351 *Panchayat Samitis*, and 27,781 *Gram Panchayats* (J. Saharia, 2016)².

1.4 Global perspective

The issue of voter turnout and specifically low voter turnout is not unique to India; it has long troubled established democracies as well. Elections in the US Presidential elections had voter turnout from 50-56% from 1996-2016 and since then has increased to ~60% in the last two elections³. Nearly half of eligible American voters abstain from presidential contests, which some scholars describe as evidence of a “crisis of democracy” (Teixeira 1992)⁴ and (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993)⁵.

In contrast, several Indian rural local-body elections—notably *Zilla Parishad* contests—have at times produced higher participation than parliamentary polls. Nevertheless, low voter turnout in urban municipal elections raises serious concerns. At the local level, non-participation could undermine the democratic process. Strengthening voter turnout is thus vital for inclusive democracy and for designing people-centred policies. Voting in local elections also offers citizens the most direct opportunity to learn democratic practices at the grassroots; given the smaller scale of local government, it is often easier for citizens to acquire civic skills and engage with public decision-making

Voter turnout—defined as the share of eligible citizens casting ballots—is a core indicator of political participation. The voter turnout in most countries has been declining in the last 50 years (though there are some exceptions). Interestingly, while the median voting turnout is about 65%⁶ across a study of 50 countries, there is a wide variation in the voting turnouts across countries with voting turnout being nearly 80-90% in countries like Uruguay, Turkey, Peru, Indonesia, Argentina and Sweden to as low as 40% in countries like Switzerland and Bulgaria

Since the 1970s, many established democracies have experienced gradual decline, while newly democratizing nations initially saw surges approaching 80 % before reverting to the mean.

1.5 Drivers of voter turnout

Literacy, female-literacy ratio (FLR), and per-capita income (PCI) do not automatically ensure coherent political judgement. Research suggests turnout rises with literacy up to a threshold, then tapers when literacy exceeds 90 %

Many observers attribute declining engagement to the “**crisis of political parties.**” For many citizens, democracy has become synonymous solely with elections; beyond voting once every five years, they remain detached from governance.

² Saharia, J. (2016). *Local Governance in Maharashtra*. State Election Commission of Maharashtra

³ The American Presidency Project, 2024

⁴ Teixeira, R. (1992). *The Disappearing American Voter*.

⁵ Rosenstone, S., & Hansen, J. (1993). *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*.

⁶ https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/01/turnout-in-u-s-has-soared-in-recent-elections-but-by-some-measures-still-trails-that-of-many-other-countries/ft_22-10-17_globalturnout_dot-png/

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) emphasizes the importance of women's equal participation in public life. Yet, questions persist regarding whether women's participation has actually increased.

Studies in Western Europe and North America identify gender, age, education, and social class as major predictors of civic engagement and electoral turnout. In the last few decades, the women participation in elections has increased in most countries. In the United States, since 1980, the proportion of eligible female adults voting in presidential elections has exceeded that of males. The same holds true for U.S. midterm elections as well over the last 40 years⁷. In Britain, the gender gap reversed in 1979; by 1997, approximately 17.8 million women voted compared to 15.8 million men⁸

Other variables also matter and we find that countries with higher shares of young voters often experience lower turnout, voting convenience increases participation (e.g. extended polling days, postal and internet voting) and compulsory voting laws in countries like Belgium (1892), Argentina (1914), and Australia (1924) have helped sustain voter turnout above 85 %.

Low turnout in municipal elections is not unique to India. U.S. cities frequently record participation rates half that of national elections.

1.6 Municipal Corporation Voter Turnout in Maharashtra

Maharashtra mirrors national and global trends of low municipal turnout. Across electoral cycles, voter participation in urban local bodies remains low. Most corporations that went to polls in 2012—including Mumbai and Thane—reported turnout below 45 % . In fact analysis of the local elections across all districts showed that Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Thane were the lowest with turnouts of about 45-47% while the rest of Maharashtra had a much higher turnout with some districts being as high as 70% (Sangli, Kolhapur)

At the urban local level, non-participation weakens the democratic base and policy responsiveness. Increasing turnout in corporation elections is thus essential for strengthening democracy and implementing pro-people policies. Local participation offers citizens an accessible entry point to democratic life.

Designing effective policy interventions to raise participation requires systematic analysis of existing data and turnout patterns, enabling targeted voter-engagement strategies for specific wards or demographic groups

⁷ <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/voters/gender-differences-voter-turnout#GGN>

⁸ Rafael Lopez Pintor, Maria Gratschew and Kate Sullivan (2002), Compulsory Voting, ARENA, Association of Electoral Administrators, OxonianRewley Press Ltd. United Kingdom.

2.0 Approach and Methodology of primary research

Purpose of the Study

Following the conceptual framing and the secondary research presented in Chapter 1, this chapter describes the approach and methodology of the **primary research** undertaken to analyse voter engagement and participation in Mumbai's municipal elections. The study focuses on understanding behavioural, informational, and logistical factors influencing citizens' participation in the **Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC)** elections specifically in the wards of Worli and Dadar, Mumbai

Objectives

1. Measure levels of awareness and civic participation among Mumbai voters.
2. Identify causes for low voter turnout in local elections compared to national polls.
3. Examine demographic differences in engagement (age, gender, occupation).
4. Suggest interventions to improve participation and civic accountability.

Research Design

A **quantitative, descriptive survey** was conducted among **336 respondents** in Mumbai – in South and Central Mumbai. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and circulated through community groups, housing societies, and civic networks. Participation was voluntary / anonymous.

Sampling and Data Collection

Responses were collected using a purposive sampling approach to ensure representation across age groups, genders, and occupations. The dataset comprised 334 valid responses.

Respondent Demographics (N = 336)

Category	Sub-group	% of Respondents
Age Group	50 – 64	48.8 %
	35 – 49	32.1 %
	25 – 34	8.3 %
	18 – 24	6.5 %
	65 +	4.2 %
Gender	Female	68.5 %
	Male	31.5 %

Questionnaire Structure (Actual questionnaire attached at end of report)

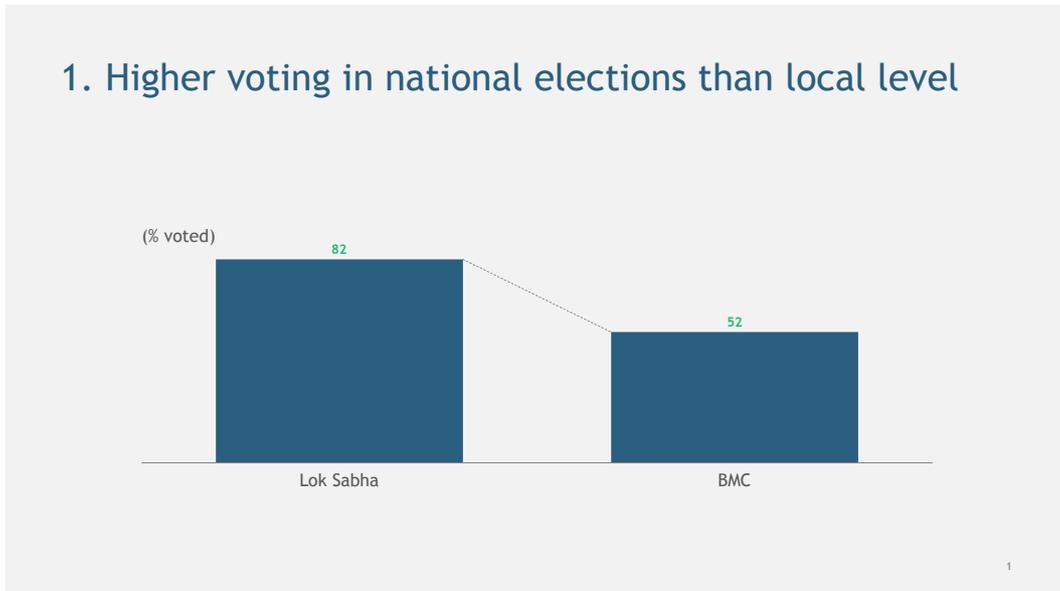
The instrument comprised six sections:

1. Voting Behaviour
2. Logistical Challenges
3. Civic Awareness
4. Perceptions of Issues and Institutional Performance
5. Engagement Preferences and Motivation
6. Demographic Profile

3.0 Key Findings

Finding 1: Lok Sabha Turnout is significantly higher than BMC Turnout

Election Type	% Voted
Lok Sabha (Parliamentary)	81.5 %
BMC (Municipal)	52.4 %



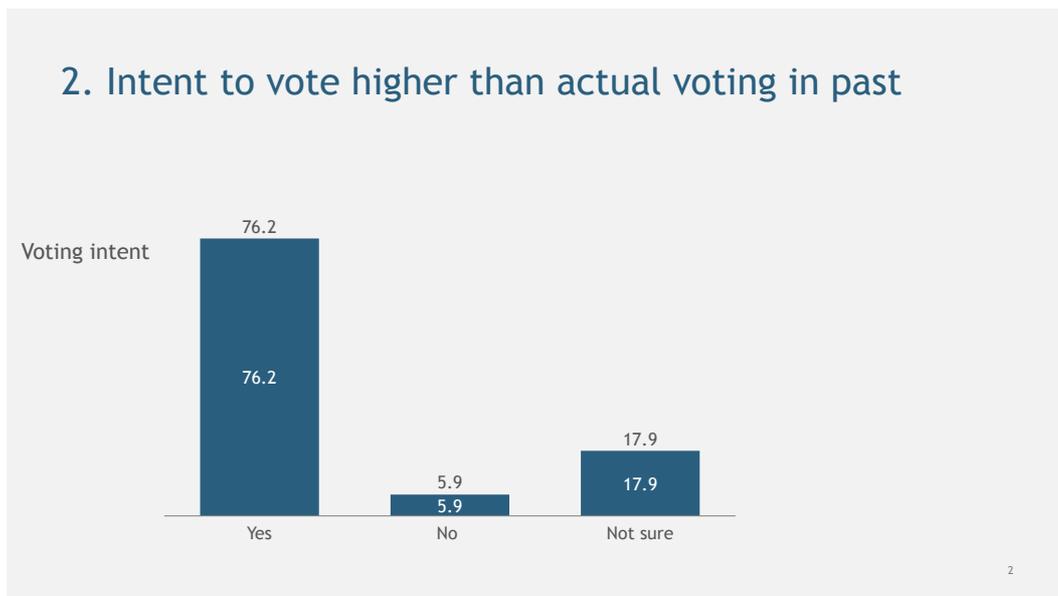
Insight:

While the data from the election commission clearly shows that BMC turnout is lower than Lok Sabha elections, the data in this sample shows that the sample is representative of the overall population. Turnout in national elections surpasses municipal participation by nearly 29 percentage points.



Finding 2: Intent to Vote Next Time > Past Actual Voting

Response	% of Respondents
Yes – Plan to Vote	76.2 %
Not Sure	17.9 %
No	5.9 %



Insight:

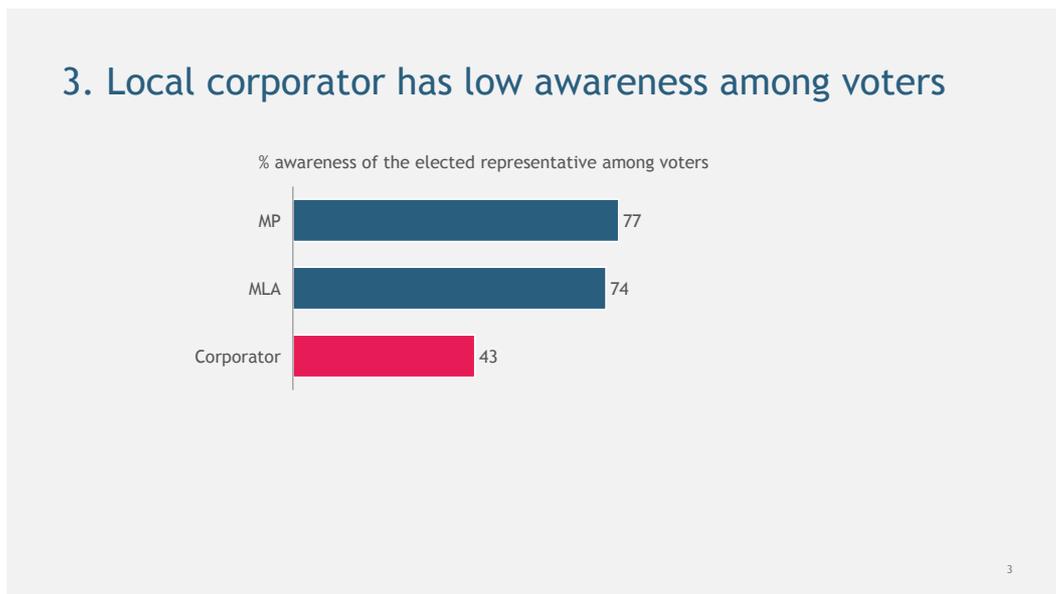
The intent to vote (76 %) greatly exceeds past action (52 %), suggesting latent willingness if awareness and convenience improve. This indicates that if there is a set of actions done, the voter turnout could be improved / increased compared to what it has been in the past. At the same time, one has to be careful that this is not the voters trying to appear politically correct even though the survey is an anonymous survey



Finding 3: Corporator Awareness Lower than MP/MLA Awareness

Representative Type Aware (%) Not Aware / Not Sure (%)

MP	76.8	23.2
MLA	73.8	26.2
Corporator	42.9	57.1

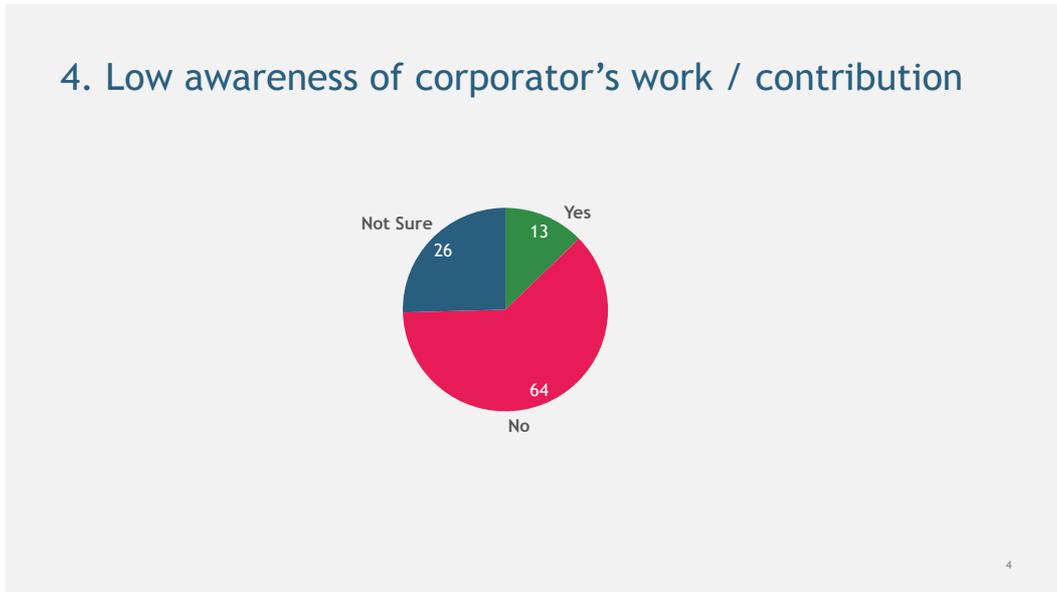


Insight:

Less than half know their corporator's name or party. The question asked for awareness of the local MLA name OR party name and the same for MP. Nearly 57% of respondents were not aware of their local corporators name or even the party – and the awareness drops by over 30 points relative to state/national representatives.

Finding 4: Low Awareness of Corporator's Work

Question	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not Sure (%)
Aware of corporator's work in past few years?	13.1	63.7	23.2

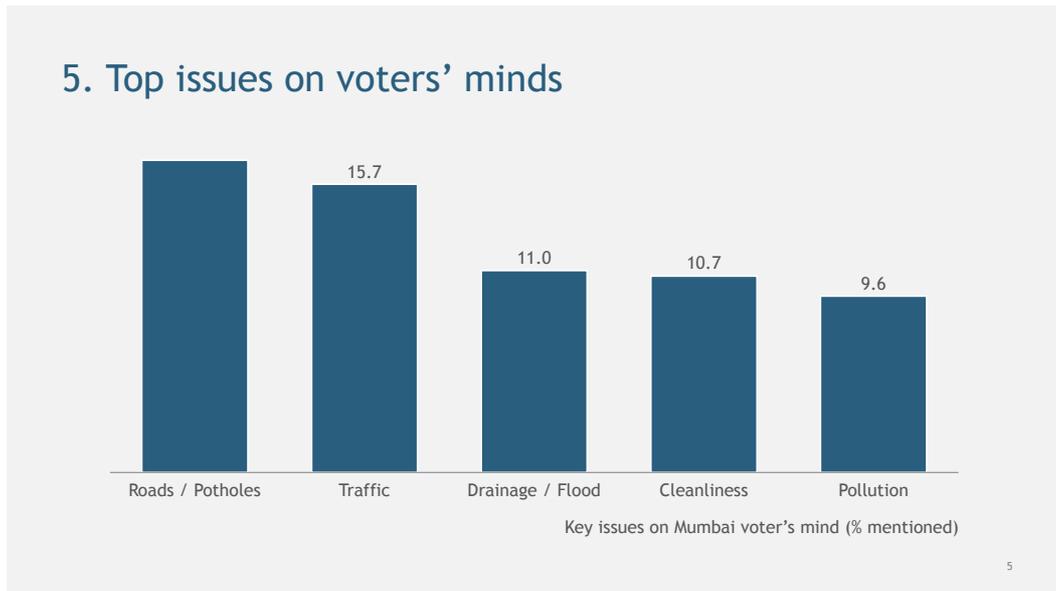


Insight:

Unsurprisingly, especially after seeing the results of the previous question. It comes across clearly that there is very low awareness of the work done by the corporator. Nearly 9 of 10 respondents lack awareness of corporator performance—underscoring weak communication and accountability.

Finding 5: Top Civic Issues Affecting Respondents

Rank	Issue	% Selecting
1	Bad roads / potholes	17.2 %
2	Traffic & footpath encroachment	15.7 %
3	Monsoon flooding / drainage	11.1 %
4	Garbage collection / cleanliness	10.7 %
5	Pollution (dust / noise / light)	9.6 %
6 – 9	Green space, disease control, water supply, corruption	≤ 6 % each

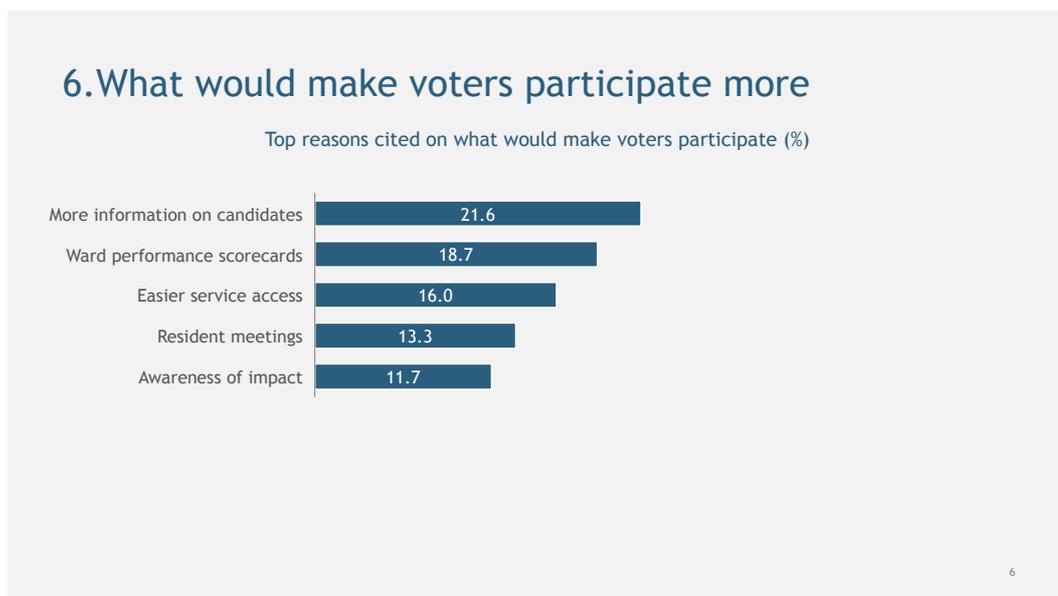


Insight:

The top five concerns relate to roads, drainage, traffic, garbage, and pollution—fall squarely within BMC's jurisdiction, yet local electoral salience remains limited. This indicates clearly that while what matters to the voter are very local issues – the ability to act on those is critical

Finding 6: Factors Encouraging Higher Participation

Rank	Factor	% Selecting
1	Information on candidates & track records	21.6 %
2	Ward performance “report cards”	18.7 %
3	Simpler civic service access	16.0 %
4	Resident meetings with candidates	13.3 %
5	Awareness on impact of BMC elections	11.7 %



Insight:

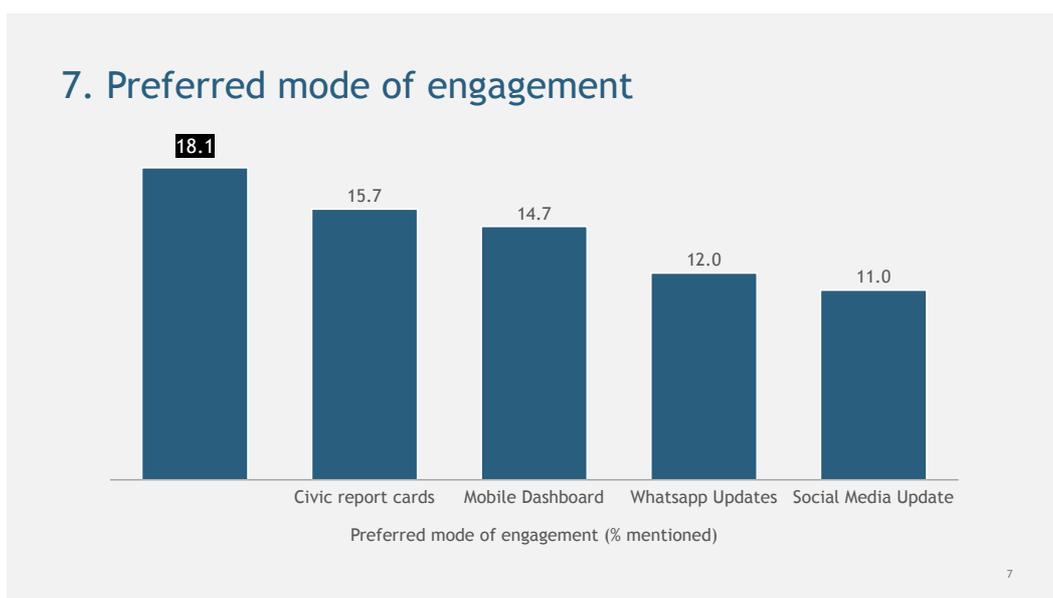
Transparency and information are primary motivators; over 40 % seek data-driven accountability mechanisms. Voters seek information on candidates / track records / performance and would likely engage if provided.

Finding 7: Preferred Modes of Leader Engagement

Rank	Engagement Mode	% Selecting
1	Town-hall / society meetings	18.1 %
2	Periodic civic report cards	15.7 %
3	Mobile app / dashboard for civic tracking	14.7 %
4	WhatsApp or email updates	12.0 %
5	Social media updates (Instagram / X / LinkedIn)	11.0 %

Insight:

While single highest preferred mode is town hall / society meetings, no single mode is a clear favourite. Respondents prefer **interactive and tech-enabled engagement** plus traditional outreach. There are wide differences in preferences that would need to be addressed.



Finding 8: Top Motivators for Voting – Verbatim Analysis

Theme	Example Response	Approx. Frequency (%)
Transparency & Accountability	“Visible use of funds,” “Accountable leaders”	2.8 %
Cleanliness & Service Delivery	“Better garbage collection,” “Improved management”	2.2 %
Information & Awareness	“Know what candidates do”	1.1 %
Reduce Corruption	“Transparency in tenders”	0.6 %
Infrastructure Improvement	“Better roads and drainage”	0.6 %

Insight:

Though open-ended responses vary, they converge on **trust, information, and tangible improvements** as turnout trigger

3.2 Synthesis of key themes

1. **Awareness Deficit:** Despite high interest in civic issues, knowledge of corporators and ward boundaries is limited.
2. **Information Transparency:** Performance visibility (e.g., ward report cards) emerges as a clear participation lever.
3. **Multi-modal engagement:** Respondents favour hybrid engagement—face-to-face plus digital dashboards.
4. **Policy Implication:** To strengthen urban democracy, the BMC and the State Election Commission could invest in sustained civic-education and information platforms.

3.3 Action steps and recommendations

In order to increase voter participation in local elections, following are the recommendations

1. Bridge awareness deficit

- **Basic logistical information concerning the voters on**
 - When the elections would be held (in advance and closer to the date)
 - Where the local polling booth would be located
- **Emphasize importance of local elections**
 - The issues that matter to the voters are very local in nature – traffic / roads / potholes etc and hence it is important to raise awareness that the local representative can play a role in addressing those
 - Example of where the local representatives have helped in solving the issues should be highlighted as well

2. Increase information transparency

- **Profile and Performance matters**
 - There needs to be increased visibility of both the role that corporators can play in the lives of citizens
 - Also greater information sharing on the profile and performance of the corporators / candidates

3. Use multi modal means multiple times to communicate

- **Digital plus face to face**
 - There is no one single means of communication that is preferred – so digital plus physical interaction is required to reinforce the messages around awareness and information transparency
 - This will require communication multiple times and local housing societies are very well suited for actioning the same

Political parties along with government agencies need to act on the above to increase participation in local elections.

3.4 In conclusion

In summary, the survey of 336 Mumbai residents highlights a paradox: citizens care deeply about urban issues yet remain detached from municipal politics. Bridging this gap requires transparency, better communication, and tangible service delivery improvements.

Increased awareness of corporator responsibilities, clearer ward-level performance data, and citizen-friendly digital tools could translate latent interest into active participation—strengthening the foundations of local democracy.



Civic Engagement Survey

(All responses are anonymous. Please answer honestly to help improve civic engagement in Mumbai.)

[Arianasinghi13@gmail.com](#) [Switch account](#)



 Not shared

* Indicates required question

Did you vote in the last Lok Sabha Elections? *

Choose



Did you vote in the last BMC Elections? *

Choose



If you did NOT vote in the last BMC election, why? (Select up to 3)

- Was not a registered voter in Mumbai
- Did not know about the election
- Did not know my voting booth
- Did not know about the role of BMC / corporators
- Did not know about the candidates
- Felt it would take too much time
- Felt local elections do not impact me
- Had to travel due to work / personal reasons
- General disinterest in politics
-

Other:

Do you plan to vote in the upcoming BMC elections? *

- Yes
- No
-



Have you ever faced logistical challenges while voting in BMC elections? (Select ^{*} all that apply)

- Voter ID not updated or unavailable
- Did not know my polling booth location
- Polling booth too far or inconvenient
- Voting process too time-consuming
- Disabled/unable to physically access booth
- Did not know how much time voting would take

Are you aware of your local MLA's name or party? ^{*}

- Yes
-

Are you aware of your MP's name or party? ^{*}

- Yes
-

Are you aware of which BMC ward your society falls under? ^{*}

- Yes
- No
- . . .



Are you aware of your local BMC corporator's name or party? *

Yes

No

Not sure

Do you know what your local BMC corporator has done in the last few years? *

Yes

No

Not sure



Which civic issues affect you the most? (Select top 3) *

- Monsoon flooding / drainage
- Garbage collection / cleanliness
- Property tax rates
- Bad roads / potholes
-
- Traffic / footpath encroachment
- Tree cutting / lack of green space
- Power availability / quality
- Pollution (dust / noise / light)
- Water cuts or water quality
- Disease management (e.g. malaria, dengue)
- Petty corruption (related to services)
-
- Lack of digital civic services / transparency
-

How satisfied are you with the overall functioning of the BMC in your area? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Dissatisfied	<input type="radio"/>	Very Satisfied				

Do you feel your area receives fair attention and services from the BMC? *

- Yes
-



What would make you participate in BMC elections more actively? (Select up to 3) *

- Clear information on corporator candidates & their track record
- Civic report cards on BMC ward performance
- Resident meetings with candidates
-
- Easier access to civic services / complaint redressal
- More issue-based campaigns
- Direct outreach in societies
-

How would you prefer political or civic leaders to engage with your society? (Select top 2) *

- Town hall meetings or society meetings
- WhatsApp or email civic updates
- Periodic report cards on civic work
- Social media updates (Instagram, X, LinkedIn)
- Articles in local newspapers or society magazines
- A mobile app or dashboard for civic tracking
-

How likely are you to recommend voting in BMC elections to your peers or neighbours? *

Not likely 1 2 3 Very likely



What is one change or assurance that would make you more likely to vote in the BMC elections or engage more with local governance? *

Your answer

What age group do you fall under? *

18–24

25–34

35–49

What is your gender? *

Male

Female



