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Research Paper

Low Voter Turnout in Bengaluru: Patterns, Causes and the Limits of Voter Awareness Campaigns

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I. Introduction

Karnataka is one of the more active electorates in India. In the 2023 Assembly election the state recorded its highest ever turnout, and some rural constituencies crossed 90 percent. Bengaluru, the state capital and its largest city, has moved the other way. Election after election, close to half of the city's registered voters do not cast a vote. This paper looks at the turnout record of Bengaluru in Assembly, Lok Sabha and civic elections up to 2026, compares it with other cities, districts and rural areas of Karnataka, examines the reasons offered for the gap, and assesses what election authorities have done to change it.

Low Voter Turnout in Bengaluru: Patterns, Causes and the Limits of Voter Awareness Campaigns
Abstract. This study examines the persistent gap between voter turnout in Bengaluru and the rest of Karnataka. It draws on statistical reports of the Election Commission of India and the Chief Electoral Officer, Karnataka, data of the State Election Commission, Supreme Court orders on the Bengaluru civic polls, a voter survey commissioned by the Chief Electoral Officer, and studies by research and civic organisations. Average turnout in Bengaluru's four Assembly divisions has stayed at about 53 to 55 percent since 2013, against a state average above 71 percent, and the three city Lok Sabha seats recorded about 53 to 54 percent in both 2019 and 2024. Civic elections have drawn even fewer voters, and the city has had no elected council since 2020. Comparison with the rest of the state shows that the lowest-turnout Lok Sabha seats outside Bengaluru, in Kalyana Karnataka, still polled 8 to 12 points higher, and districts bordering the city exceeded 83 percent in 2023. Urban seats and city corporation polls in Belagavi, Kalaburagi, Hubballi-Dharwad and Mysuru also trail their rural surroundings, which places Bengaluru at the far end of a wider urban pattern. The study finds that low turnout reflects both real disengagement and inflated electoral rolls in a highly mobile city, as the 2026 Special Intensive Revision of rolls suggests. Awareness campaigns have improved the voting experience but have not shifted turnout. Cleaner rolls, booth-level targeting and regular local elections are likely to matter more.

Keywords: *Voter turnout; urban apathy; electoral rolls; SVEEP; Bengaluru; Karnataka*

1. Introduction

Voter turnout is the most basic measure of participation in a representative democracy. In Karnataka it has risen steadily: the 2023 Assembly election recorded 73.19 percent, the highest since the state was formed [1]. Bengaluru has not shared in this trend. While announcing the 2023 election schedule, the Chief Election Commissioner named urban apathy as a major concern in Karnataka [2], and the Chief Electoral Officer has described the city as the state's lowest-turnout area in every recent election [3]. The problem matters because Bengaluru holds a large share of the state's electorate, 28 Assembly constituencies, and the state's economic centre. This paper sets out the turnout record, reviews the explanations offered by election authorities and researchers, and assesses the measures taken to raise participation.

II. The turnout record

Table 1 compares turnout in Bengaluru's four electoral divisions with the state average across three Assembly elections. Taken together, the four divisions recorded 52.83 percent in 2013 and about 55 percent in both 2018 and 2023, some 17 to 19 percentage points below the state average [2][4]. Turnout in every division fell between 2013 and 2018 and changed little in 2023. In 2008 the four divisions had recorded only 47.3 percent [2]. In 2023 the 11 constituencies with the lowest polling in Karnataka were all in Bengaluru Urban district, with

Bommanahalli the lowest at 47.22 percent, while Hosakote in neighbouring Bengaluru Rural district recorded 90.33 percent [1].

Table 1. Assembly election turnout (%) in Bengaluru's electoral divisions

Electoral division	2013	2018	2023
BBMP Central	57.71	55.18	55.50
BBMP North	56.58	53.47	52.59
BBMP South	55.04	51.98	52.33
Bengaluru Urban	62.03	57.00	57.69
Karnataka (state)	**71.83**	**72.44**	**73.19**

Source: Election Commission data as compiled in [2] and [4]; state figures from [1] and [2]. 2023 figures are final; 2013 and 2018 figures are as reported by the Election Commission.

The Lok Sabha pattern is the same (Table 2). In 2024 the three city seats again recorded the lowest turnout among the 14 Karnataka constituencies that voted on 26 April, with Bangalore South lowest at 53.17 percent, while Mandya recorded 81.67 percent [5][6]. Bangalore Rural, which mixes city wards with rural segments, rose from 64.98 to 68.30 percent. Within it, the urban Assembly segments recorded less than 61 percent turnout among women, compared with over 83 percent in the rural segments [6]. Bengaluru Urban district as a whole recorded 54.76 percent [6].

Table 2. Lok Sabha election turnout (%) in Bengaluru constituencies

Lok Sabha constituency	2019	2024
Bangalore Central	54.30	54.06
Bangalore North	54.73	54.45
Bangalore South	53.64	53.17
Bangalore Rural	64.98	68.30
Karnataka (14 seats polled on 26 April 2024)	**-**	**69.56**

Source: Election Commission of India and Chief Electoral Officer, Karnataka [5][6].

Civic elections draw even fewer voters. Turnout in the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) election was 44.1 percent in 2010 and 49.3 percent in 2015 [7]. The State Election Commissioner has contrasted this with panchayat elections, where average turnout is around 85 percent [8]. Since the BBMP council's term ended in September 2020, the city has had no elected local government. The Greater Bengaluru Authority now oversees five city corporations with 369 wards and about 89 lakh voters [9]. After setting deadlines of 30 June and 31 August 2026, the Supreme Court in July 2026 directed that elections to all five corporations be held in December 2026 [9].

III. Bengaluru compared with the rest of Karnataka

The gap is clearest when Bengaluru is set beside other parts of the state. In the 2023 Assembly election ten districts polled above 80 percent. Chikkaballapur recorded the highest district turnout at 85.56 percent, followed by Bengaluru Rural (85.08), Ramanagara (85.04), Mandya (84.45) and Tumakuru (83.58), all districts that border the city. Of the 224 constituencies, 79 polled between 80 and 90 percent, led by Melukote at 91 percent and Hoskote at 90.95 percent. At the bottom were Bengaluru (55 percent), Kalaburagi (66.43 percent) and Yadgir (68.77 percent), and in all 28 constituencies polled under 60 percent [19].

Low urban turnout is not confined to the capital. In north Karnataka, rural and backward taluks polled about 10 percentage points higher than urban seats in 2023 [20]. In Belagavi district, which averaged 76.95 percent, Belgaum Uttar, the seat covering the district headquarters town, recorded 59.4 percent, while rural Athani recorded 83.68 percent. Bijapur City polled 64 percent against 73 percent in Indi, and Bagalkot town 68.5 percent [20]. Gulbarga Dakshin recorded 56.32 percent, the lowest in Kalyana Karnataka [21]. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, women's turnout in the three city segments of Mysuru (Krishnaraja, Chamaraja and Narasimharaja) was 59 to 64 percent, while the other segments of the constituency were above 70 percent [6]. Bengaluru's figures are lower still, and they cover a far larger electorate.

Table 3. Lok Sabha 2024 turnout (%) in selected constituencies across Karnataka

Lok Sabha constituency	Region	2024
Mandya	Old Mysore	81.67
Chikkodi	Kittur Karnataka	78.66
Shimoga	Malnad	78.33
Kolar	Old Mysore	78.27
Dakshina Kannada	Coastal	77.56
Dharwad	Kittur Karnataka	74.37
Belgaum	Kittur Karnataka	71.49
Mysore	Old Mysore (city and rural)	70.62
Bidar	Kalyana Karnataka	65.47
Raichur	Kalyana Karnataka	64.66
Gulbarga	Kalyana Karnataka	62.25
Bangalore Central / North / South	Bengaluru city	54.06 / 54.45 / 53.17

Source: Election Commission of India final turnout figures [5][17]. Average for all 28 Karnataka seats: 70.64 percent [18].

Table 3 shows that the lowest-turnout seats outside Bengaluru, in Kalyana Karnataka, still polled about 8 to 12 points more than the city seats, while rural constituencies in Old Mysore, the coast, Malnad and Kittur Karnataka polled between 71 and 82 percent. Mysore, which contains a large city, sat close to the state average.

The comparison changes for local elections (Table 4). City corporation polls in other large cities have been as thinly attended as Bengaluru's. In 2021 Kalaburagi recorded 49.40 percent, Belagavi 50.41 percent and Hubballi-Dharwad 53.81 percent, down from 66 percent in Hubballi-Dharwad's 2013 election. These polls were held during the Covid-19 pandemic, and complaints of missing names on the rolls were also reported [22]. The figures are close to the BBMP's 49.3 percent in 2015. Smaller towns and villages vote in much larger numbers: 58 urban local bodies recorded 68.99 percent in December 2021 and gram panchayats 77.35 percent in the same round [24]. In the second phase of the 2020 gram panchayat elections turnout was 80.71 percent; even there, Bengaluru Urban district was lowest at 67.48 percent and Bengaluru Rural highest at 91.86 percent [23].

Table 4. Turnout (%) in local body elections in Karnataka

Election	Year	Turnout
BBMP, Bengaluru	2010	44.1
BBMP, Bengaluru	2015	49.3
Kalaburagi City Corporation	2021	49.40
Belagavi City Corporation	2021	50.41
Hubballi-Dharwad City Corporation	2021	53.81
58 urban local bodies (towns)	2021	68.99
Gram panchayats, second phase	2020	80.71

Source: State Election Commission, Karnataka, as compiled in [7], [22], [23] and [24].

IV. Explaining the gap

Election officials and researchers point to several overlapping causes. The first concerns the electoral rolls themselves. In a city with heavy migration, people who move away are often not deleted from the roll, while new residents are added quickly, so the number of registered voters grows faster than the number of residents actually entitled to vote there. A Janaagraha study of Shanti Nagar constituency for 2011 to 2014 found that about 30 percent of more than two lakh registered voters could not be found at their listed addresses [10]. A 2016 Janaagraha study of Booth Level Officers in Bengaluru found that 7 percent had made no door-to-door visits and that, on average, officers carried out only four of the six core tasks expected of them each year [11]. In a small study of 40 households in constituencies including Vijayanagar, Basavanagudi and Bommanahalli, Lokniti researchers found many homes where more than half the listed voters were living abroad or outside Karnataka [12].

The 2026 Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has put numbers on this problem. Data released by the Greater Bengaluru Authority in August 2026 showed that 47.68 percent of entries on the city's rolls were flagged as absent, shifted, deceased or duplicate, including 33.8 lakh voters who had permanently shifted and 3.15 lakh who had died [13]. These entries are still being verified, and the final roll is due on 27 October 2026 [14]. Even so, they suggest that a part of Bengaluru's low turnout comes from an inflated denominator and not only from people choosing to stay home.

A second cause is the practical difficulty of voting. A knowledge, attitude and practices survey commissioned by the Chief Electoral Officer found that 25 percent of non-voters did not know where their polling

station was, 17.5 percent of urban voters were put off by long queues, and 7.5 percent did not know who the candidates were [15]. Many city polling locations hold several booths; in 2024 there were 2,089 locations in the 14 constituencies with more than three booths each [15].

A third cause is weak connection between voters and electoral politics. The Lokniti national coordinator has observed that younger urban voters are engaged with politics but not with electoral politics [12]. Urban governance experts also note that the long absence of an elected city council has weakened democratic accountability in Bengaluru [9]. It removes the most local link between residents and their representatives.

V. What has been tried

The Election Commission's Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme has made Bengaluru a special focus. Before the 2023 election it ran an "Electhon" with the Indian Institute of Science, start-ups and colleges, and sent teams to the lowest-turnout polling stations to find out why people stayed away [2]. Polling was fixed on a Wednesday to discourage long weekends, and 264 theme-based polling stations were set up across the city [4][16]. In 2024 the Chief Electoral Officer's office identified about 3,000 polling stations within BBMP limits where turnout had been very low, some below 30 percent. It distributed voter slips with QR codes for navigation, launched the Chunavana app showing queue lengths and parking, and placed facilitation counters at locations with several booths [15]. Resident welfare associations and employers were brought into the campaign [3].

These measures improved the voting experience, and the QR-code slips were credited with raising turnout in the Bengaluru teachers' constituency from 66 percent in 2020 to 86 percent in 2024 [15]. In general elections, however, Tables 1 and 2 show almost no change. The Chief Electoral Officer had aimed for at least 60 percent in Bengaluru in 2024 [3]; the city seats stayed near 54 percent.

VI. Discussion

The evidence suggests that Bengaluru's turnout problem has two parts that need different responses. One part is measurement. If a large share of names on the roll belong to people who no longer live in the city, the published turnout understates participation by those who do. Accurate rolls, easier transfer of registration when people move within or out of the city, and well-supported Booth Level Officers would give a truer figure and help genuine voters find their names. The SIR exercise of 2026, once its final roll is published, offers a chance to measure this effect in the next election.

The comparison with other parts of Karnataka shows that low turnout follows urbanisation across the state. District headquarters towns poll below their rural hinterland, and city corporation elections in Kalaburagi, Belagavi and Hubballi-Dharwad draw about half of their electorate, as Bengaluru's did. Bengaluru is the extreme case. Its size and the mobility of its population magnify the problems with the rolls, and its Assembly and Lok Sabha seats sit well below urban seats elsewhere in the state.

The other part is real disengagement, concentrated in certain neighbourhoods and polling stations. Here the authorities' shift to booth-level data is promising, since it allows effort to be directed where turnout is lowest. Regular civic elections could also help. Residents who can see a corporator responsible for their ward have a reason to vote that a distant Assembly or Lok Sabha seat may not give them.

VII. Conclusion

For over fifteen years Bengaluru has voted at rates well below the rest of Karnataka in Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, and its civic polls have drawn under half its voters. Other cities in the state show the same urban pattern on a smaller scale, while neighbouring rural districts poll above 80 percent. Awareness drives have made polling easier but have not changed the overall pattern. The research reviewed here points to inflated rolls in a mobile city, practical barriers on polling day and a weak local political link as the main causes. The final roll of the 2026 revision and the long-delayed corporation elections due in December 2026 will together show how much of the gap is real and how much lies in the records.

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