



DALIT PARTICIPATION IN PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TEKARI BLOCK, GAYA, BIHAR

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The post-independence period in India has seen the rise of democratic institutions among the scheduled castes, particularly the Dalits, who form the leading discriminated group in the country. With about 250 million Dalits, there has been limited economic improvement in the past 50 years, and every fourth Indian is a Dalit. The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution has been instrumental in devolving power and democratic decentralisation. However, the present study aims to explore the participation of Dalits in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the level of participation. We conducted the study in various panchayats in Tekari Block, Gaya, Bihar. The study claims that the reservation for Dalit representatives hasn't been properly put into practice, and the main reasons for this issue include not having enough financial independence, resistance from traditional male-dominated views, control by bureaucrats, old feudal beliefs, poor education, unwillingness from state politicians, corruption in administration, and bias against elected Dalit panchayat presidents. The sample for the study consists of 30 SC/STs, selected using a purposive sampling technique. The objective is to examine Dalit involvement in local governance, assess the extent of their participation, and enhance political engagement among Dalit constituents in local governance. This will involve analysing existing barriers to participation, identifying successful strategies employed by Dalits in various regions, and fostering inclusive policies that empower these communities. Ultimately, the goal is to create a more equitable political landscape where all voices are heard and represented.

Keywords: *Panchayati Raj, Reservations, 73rd Amendment Act, Dalit and Political Participation.*

Introduction

The demand to decentralise governance and administration, ensure openness, and grant access to knowledge about state affairs is becoming a global issue. The fundamental concept of democratic decentralisation is to expand the scope of democracy by providing both democratic governance and autonomy at lower levels of administration. It aims to significantly empower local government institutions through various ways to cultivate them into “the small fountainheads of democracy” or “multi-faceted democracy.” The plan for decentralisation envisions community engagement as a catalyst for the social transformation of culturally, economically, and hierarchically varied groupings into a more democratic and egalitarian structure. The term of participation has evolved to encompass diverse interpretations; at one extreme, it signifies mere nominal membership in a group, while at the other, it denotes a substantial role in the decision-making process. In recent decades, caste has significantly influenced Dalit political engagement and the advocacy of issues concerning the most marginalised populations. In a highly stratified society, Dalits from lower castes have diminished access to public resources, exacerbated by their caste status. This marginalisation hinders their ability to represent and express the perspectives of their constituency, resulting in their demands frequently being disregarded or overshadowed by the prevailing segment of society.

Political Participation: A Theoretical Perspective **The Concept of Political Participation**

The idea of direct democracy originated in ancient Greek and Roman city-states, allowing citizens to have a say in government. Because of their very small populations and relatively small states, direct democracies were able to flourish in these nations. Direct democratic methods and structures evolved as populations and territories grew. Political participation is a core term in political science, characterised as the endeavours of private persons aiming to affect or endorse government and political processes. According to Milbrath and Goel, this broad definition encompasses both ceremonial and supportive acts. In the traditional sense, being politically active means taking part in a society's decision-making processes, such as choosing leaders

and formulating policies, on an individual basis. People from all walks of life working together towards a shared goal is what makes participation so vital to social life.

Participation and Theories of Democracy

Participation is essential for a society to exist and survive, regardless of its traditional or modern nature. It involves activities by individual members, focusing on individual behaviour and attitudes as antecedents. To understand why people act, one must consider the embeddedness of individuals in a context conducive to action, such as institutional arrangements or the community to which they belong. Modern social science is about structure, persistence, dynamics, and change, which affects research designs. This understanding of individuals' actions is crucial for understanding the functioning of societies and politics at large. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, following the anti-Vietnam War rallies in the United States and student protests across many democratic nations. Requests for an extended political role of the citizenry became louder; they culminated, at least in Europe, in expectations about the demise of the "late-capitalist state" (Max Kaase & Kenneth Newton, 1995). Thus, liberal-elitist democratic theory was extended in scope through the notion of participatory democracy, a notion that claimed direct political channels of influence for citizens going beyond the established modes of representative, indirect participation through parties and elections. In their important study *Political Action*, Samuel Barnes and others (1979) described a wider range of ways for citizens to get involved in politics and introduced the terms conventional and unconventional political participation to bring together elitist and participatory ideas about how people can engage in democracy (Encyclopaedia of Political Science, 2011). "Political participation refers simply to activity that is intended to influence government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies."

Political participation is a complex and broad term encompassing both overt and covert political activities. It involves individuals and groups in the political process at various levels, affecting decision-makers' behaviours and societal decisions. Milbrath's study (1965) interpreted political participation broadly, including spectator activities, voting, political discussion, campaign activities, and gladiatorial activities like soliciting funds, being a candidate, and holding public or party office. This involvement extends beyond the selection of decision-makers to influence societal decisions. Political participation refers to the involvement of citizens in political activities that influence their decision-making behaviours and actions. It can be successful or unsuccessful, organised or unorganised, episodic or continuous, and employ legitimate or illegitimate methods to influence public politics, public affairs administration, or the choice of political leaders at any level of government. Crook and Manor define political participation as citizens' active engagement with public institutions, including voting, campaigning, and pressuring individually or through a group. Political participation encompasses not only contesting elections and decision-making but also voluntary activities such as voting, supporting political groups, communicating with the legislature, and fostering political views among electorates. It encompasses participation in any organised activity that impacts or seeks to affect power relationships.

The Concept of Dalit and their Rights

Das explains that the term Dalit, derived from the Sanskrit word dal, signifies both caste and class of a social category. In 1973, the term was used to refer to the Scheduled Castes, who were often referred to as Out-Castes, Untouchables, or Scheduled Castes, and were often alienated from mainstream society. Indian society has used the term Dalits to affirm identity and organise for collective action. As the most marginalised and lowest-caste group, they represent nearly one-fifth of the overall Indian population. They suffer from exploitative practices and control less than 5% of the country's resources. To overcome their challenges, fundamental change is required. The Dalit demographic, primarily comprising landless agricultural labourers, resides below the official poverty threshold and exhibits a literacy rate of 62%. Fewer than 10% of Dalit homes possess access to potable water, power, and sanitation facilities. Mahatma Phule acknowledged the Dalit movement and highlighted it to the Indian National Government. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar significantly influenced the Dalit movement, propelling it towards a more radical trajectory. Gandhi perceived the Dalit issue as a social concern, whereas Ambedkar regarded it as a political and economic dilemma instigated by the upper castes. As the inaugural law minister, Ambedkar instituted progressive legal changes and integrated them into the Constitution.

India's constitution guarantees equality to all citizens, regardless of their background. It includes fundamental rights, directive principles, the Indian Penal Code, and the Criminal Procedure Code. Articles 15 and 16 forbid discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, or religion, while Article 14 advocates for gender equality. Article 17 abolishes untouchability; however, specific rights are established to safeguard the human rights of Dalits. The Untouchables Offences Act was enacted in 1955, succeeded by the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976 to prohibit discrimination against Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes in educational institutions. The Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) was established to avert exploitation and discrimination against Dalit women.

Dalit women face exploitation, violence, and threats from society, including police brutality and threats from upper caste men. They are often landless or cannot hold complete rights over their land, and seeking legal redress is difficult due to their ignorance and societal threats. Upper-caste men often rape Dalit women as a means of retaliation and to teach the Dalit community a lesson about upward mobility. Asserting their rights is difficult and often leads to adverse results. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) of 1992 in India provided constitutional legitimacy to Panchayats as the third tier of self-government, enhancing public representation and governance mechanisms. The Act aimed to address the marginalisation of poor, under-represented groups like women, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes. The Act and subsequent State Acts on Panchayati Raj Institutions

(PRIs) provided mandatory provisions for reservation of seats and Gram Sabha meetings, allowing Scheduled Castes (SCs) in villages to participate in political decision-making. Despite this, their leadership has not achieved significant social acceptance, which contradicts the Constitution's intent.

Panchayat Raj Institutions in India: Historical Background, 73rd and 74th Amendment

The Panchayati Raj, a system of local self-governance, is a political framework prevalent in South Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. This is the most ancient system of local governance in the Indian subcontinent. 'Gramme Swaraj' was Mahatma Gandhi's slogan, and the motto 'Power to the People' encapsulates the core of genuine democracy. The initial mention of panchayat originates from the term pancha, denoting an assembly of five (pancha panchasvanusthitah), as recorded in the *Shanti-Parva* of the Mahabharata. Pancha and panchavanustitah are semantically akin to 'panchayat'. The Arthashastra of Kautilya, who flourished around 400 B.C., also contains a description of these village councils. The Arthashastra provides a detailed description of the village administrative structure in existence during that period. Throughout this period, the *Adyaksha*, or headman, oversaw the village administration. Additional authorities included *Samkhyaka* (accountant), *Anikitsaka* (veterinary doctor), *Jamgh Karmika* (village couriers), and *Chikitsaka* (physician). The village headman was tasked with overseeing the collection of governmental revenues and regulating the actions of offenders. In *Valmiki's Ramayana*, there are allusions to the *Ganapada*, perhaps a federation of village republics.

Self-governing village communities, distinguished by agrarian economies, have existed in India from ancient times. It is referenced in the Rigveda, which dates to roughly 200 B.C. The village served as the fundamental administrative unit during the Vedic period. The most notable aspect of the early Vedic politics was the establishment of popular assemblies, particularly the 'Sabha' and the 'Samiti', which warrant special attention. The Samiti was a Vedic folk assembly that, in certain instances, had the authority to elect a king, whereas the Sabha executed certain judicial tasks. Both the Samiti and Sabha have the right to debate – a prerogative absent in the popular assemblies of other ancient civilisations. The office of the village headman (*Gramani*) signifies the establishment of the village as an administrative entity. During the later Vedic period, the Samiti ceased to function as a common assembly, while the Sabha diminished into a limited entity akin to the king's Privy Council.

Every state must have a three-tiered Panchayat structure, with village, intermediate, and district Panchayats. States that have fewer than 20 lakh people may decide to use a two-tier structure. Panchayats have a five-year term, and new elections must be held within six months if they are dissolved early. The entire registered population will make up the gram sabha. One-third of the seats are designated for women, while seats are set aside for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes based on their demographic percentage within a Panchayat area. At least one-third of the seats in panchayats are reserved for women, including those from Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes (Mishra, 2003). The state legislature has resolved to allocate chairperson positions in panchayats across all levels for SC/ST individuals and women, ensuring that a minimum of one-third of these positions are designated for women. Furthermore, reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) will be allocated in accordance with their population proportions within the state, thereby ensuring equitable representation in Panchayati Raj institutions. (Salustowicz, 2008). The Governor of the State will establish a State Finance Commission to evaluate the financial condition of the Panchayats and offer suggestions regarding the principles for the distribution of taxes, duties, tolls, and fees between the State Government and the Panchayats. (Arora, 2011).

Dalits are a pan-Indian category with heterogeneity and belong to the most oppressed bottom collectivities in hierarchical society. The study of Indian society has historically focused on Indian villages, as they are considered integral to Indian civilization. Scholars across disciplines have studied village communities, initially aligning with the study of caste, chaturvana, joint family, and social hierarchy as ideal types by Indologists and Dwijas. Srinivas (1955), Beteille (1974), Kroeber and Red Field (1965), Red Field (1965), and Shanin (1987) have examined the concepts of villages, joint family structures, and the caste system. Srinivas's "India's Villages" (1955), M. Marriott's "Villages in India", D.N. Majumdar's "Rural Profiles" (1955), and S.C. Dube's "Indian Villages" represent significant research contributions to the study of Indian villages. Scholars have focused on the location of untouchables, their relationships with other communities, patron-client relations in the agrarian economy, and the overall life situations and challenges faced by Dalits. A different group of researchers has examined Indian villages and produced monographs. Dube (1955), Majumdar (1958), and Lewis (1958) are significant contributions to the field. Additionally, research on Indian village communities has recognised the caste system as fundamentally a hierarchical structure, suggesting that the examination of caste holds greater significance than the analysis of village communities (Dumont and Pocock). Majumdar (1958) highlighted the varying attitudes, settlement patterns, and lifestyles present within village communities, despite their cohabitation. Beteille identified unity as a physical element rather than a social one.

Manoj Rai and Narendra Kumar (2006) studied the changing dynamics of rural leadership with regard to Dalit leadership in their paper "Dalit Leadership in Panchayats: A Comparative Study of Four States." They investigate how the quota system has enabled Dalits, particularly Dalit women, to attain legitimate authority in local governance and the obstacles that impede their effective involvement in this process. The research 'Affirmative Action and Dalits: Political Representation in Panchayats' by Inbanathan, Anand (2003) demonstrates that the quota system for political representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions is largely ineffective for Dalits, particularly for Dalit women, who remain marginalised within the rural political structure. In their 1996 study, "Popular Participation in Rural Development," Prem Prashant and colleagues aimed to investigate the patterns and characteristics of rising leaders. Their observations suggest that traditional leadership is evolving as a result of the enactment of the 73rd

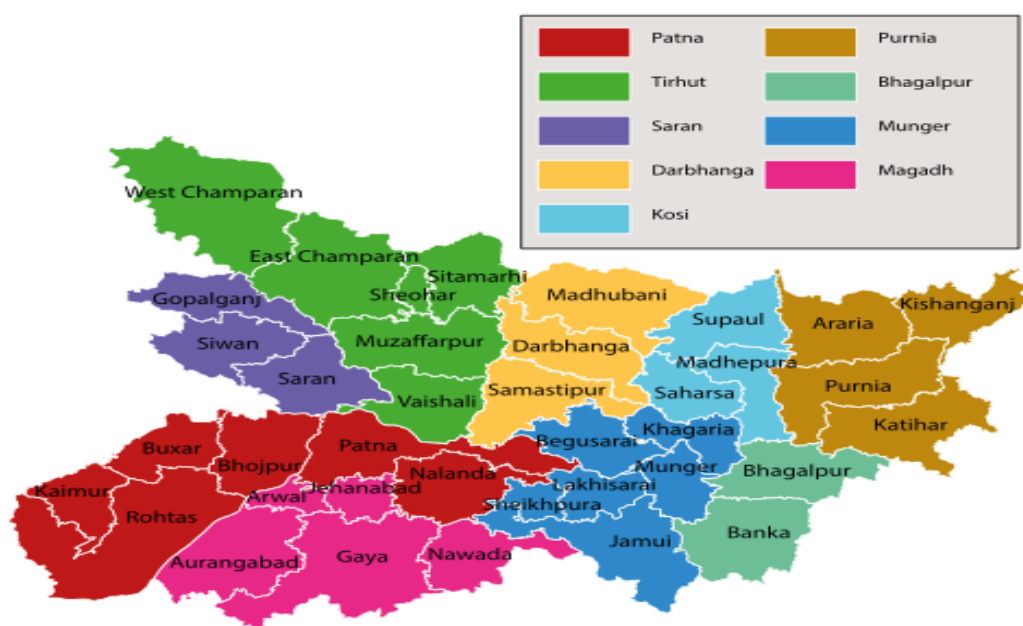
Amendment Act. This study notes that a considerable percentage of Panchayat Raj leaders are younger and originate from marginalised areas of society. The results demonstrate that these leaders have minimal landholdings and a modest annual income. The authors argue that the new law is important because it allows more involvement from marginalised groups, with many people from these communities now included in the Panchayat Raj Institutions, which helps ensure fairness in development issues.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the involvement of Dalits in local governance.
2. To analyse the extent of involvement and input provided by Dalit individuals within local governance structures.
3. To make appropriate recommendations for ways to increase Dalit members' political participation in the local government.

Profile of Bihar State and Demography/Population of the State

Bihar, a state with a rich history, is home to significant mythological events, prominent religions like Buddhism and Jainism, and the birthplace of the Maurya Empire. As of the 2011 Census, the population of Bihar was 10.41 Crores, an increase from 8.30 Crores in 2001. The population growth in this decade was 25.42 percent, making Bihar the largest state in India, accounting for 8.60 percent of the total population in 2011.



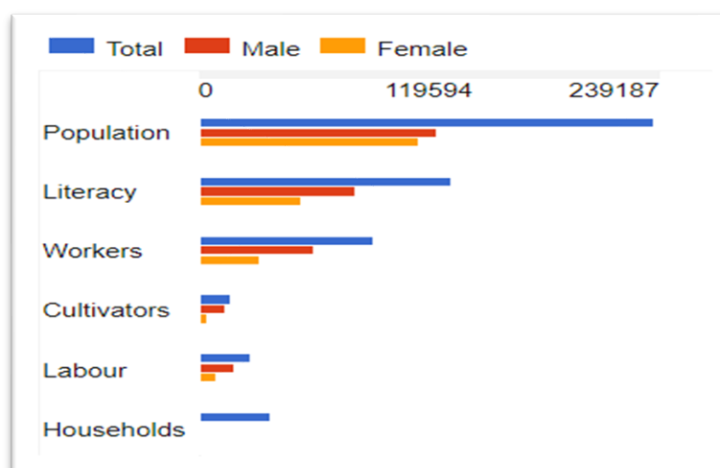
*Source: <https://state.bihar.gov.in>

Gaya District: Demographic Details

Gaya, a major district in the state, has a population of 43,79,383 according to the 2011 Census. The majority of the population is male, with 51.76% and 48.24% females. The district is predominantly rural, with 86.86% of its inhabitants residing in rural areas. The decadal growth rate is 26.08 percent, higher than the state and national average. The Scheduled Caste population is the highest in the state, while the scheduled tribe population is less than 0.5 percent. The literacy rate is 66.35 percent, with a low female literacy rate of 55.90 percent. The total work participation rate is 36.8%, with agriculture laborers and cultivators being the main and non-agriculture sector workers.

Tikari Block Population Census 2011 – 2023

Tikari is a Nagar Panchayat city in Gaya, Bihar, with a population of 21,324, with 11,099 males and 10,225 females. The city has a 15.33% child-to-child ratio and a higher literacy rate of 80.07% compared to the state average of 61.80%. The city has over 3,210 houses, providing basic amenities like water and sewerage. It is authorized to build roads within its limits and impose taxes on properties within its jurisdiction. Every five years, elections are held. Population of Tikari 2022–2023 The expected population of Tikari Nagar Panchayat in 2023 is roughly 29,300. The 2021 scheduled census for Tikari City has been postponed owing to COVID-19. We anticipate that a new population census for Tikari City will be held in 2023, and it will be updated accordingly upon completion. The present numbers for Tikari town are merely estimations, but all figures from 2011 are precise.



*Source: data collected from Bihar government website <https://state.bihar.gov.in>

Tikari Caste Factor: Schedule Caste (SC) constitutes 11.65 % while Schedule Tribe (ST) were 0.06 % of total population in Tikari (NP).

Religion	Percentage
Hindu	79.74%
Muslim	19.79%
Christian	0.08%
Sikh	0.01%
Buddhist	0.01%
Jain	0.07%
Others	0.00%
No Religion	0.31%

*Source: data collected from Bihar government website. <https://state.bihar.gov.in>

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Data analysis is a crucial research task, involving a critical examination of data to study characteristics and relationships among variables. It involves breaking down complex factors into simple parts for interpretation, aiming to understand recent fact meanings and breaking down complex factors into simpler arrangements.

Objective 1: To study the participation of Dalits in local governance.

To achieve this objective, the norms established in the manual have been used. The following table, subsequent interpretation, and figure depict the participation of Dalits in local governance.

Participation of Gender

Gender	No of responded	Percentage
Male	22	73%
Female	8	27%
Total	30	100%

*Source: primary data collected from field.

The above table shows that the majority 73 percent of *Dalits* were male. The remaining 27 percent of respondents were female. It clearly shows that female *Dalits* were not properly participating while most male members participated in the Panchayat election.

The age group significantly influences electoral participation, with the majority of young *Dalits* aged 20-30 and 30-40 actively engaging in panchayat elections.

Educational Qualification

Educational Qualification	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Illiterate	8	26.66
Primary	5	16.66
Middle	8	26.66
Secondary	7	23.33
Graduation and Above	2	6.66
Total	30	100.00

**Source: primary data collected from field.*

Education is crucial for the effective functioning of all administrative systems. The Indian constitution does not impose any educational qualifications for participating in any type of general election. The table above indicates that 26.66 per cent of elected Dalits lack any educational qualifications. 16.66 per cent of Dalits had only primary-level education qualifications. 26.66 per cent of Dalits had a middle level of education. 23.33 per cent of elected Dalits possessed a secondary education level (SSLC). 6.66 per cent of Dalits possessed a degree or higher level of education. The findings suggest that a significant portion of educated Dalits showed little interest in engaging with local governance.

Political Background

Political Parties	No. of Respondents	Percentage
JDU	15	50
LJP	9	30
BJP	6	20
RJD	0	0
Total	30	100.00

**Source: primary data collected from field.*

The political background of *Dalit Panchayat* members. Majority 50 percentages of members were having background support of Janta Dal Unieted (JDU), at present ruling party in Bihar. Followed by 30 percentages of *Dalit* members were having background support of Lok Jansakti Party (LJP). 20 percentages of *Dalit* members were having support of Bartiya Janata Party (BJP). 0 precenta of dalit members were having support of Rastriya Janda dal (RJD).

Objective 2: To understand the level of participation, and contribution made by the Dalit members as members of local governance.

Dalit leaders are primarily motivated by friends and caste leaders, with 15.9% of Dalit members being motivated by relatives. The majority of Dalit Panchayat members are not directly promoted by political party leaders, while caste leaders are promoted by their members to contest elections. Participation in Panchayat work is low, with 31.8% of Dalit members participating poorly, 30.8% moderately, 17.8% good, and 4.7 very good. The majority of Dalit Panchayat members focus on economic development, welfare programs, school building, irrigation facilities, and link road development. The majority of Dalit Panchayat members are not actively participating in Panchayat work.

Objective 3: To suggest suitable measure to strengthen the political participation among Dalit members in local governance.

The 73rd Amendment Act has significantly impacted democratic decentralization of power, allowing women to have a one-third reservation in power institutions. This constitutional obligation ensures participation of all classes, including women, in grass root decision-making processes, a crucial aspect of democracy's sustenance. This represents a significant step towards ensuring equal representation in decision-making processes. Indian society has improved the status of Dalits post-independence, but their participation in rural power structures remains limited. Lower caste members have assumed leadership in formal institutions, but their role in decision-making is negligible. They have found place in community power structures due to reservation of seats in PRI's and LSG's, but their representation in formal bodies would be insignificant without reservation. Dalit leaders' decision-making is limited to constitutional establishments, with dominant groups always having an upper hand in community affairs.

The Major findings of the study are as stated below

The Panchayat elections reveal a pattern of leadership where the majority of Dalit individuals, aged 30-50, are married and live in nuclear families. Their participation in Gram Panchayats is crucial, but their lack of education and awareness of PRIs hinder their ability to effectively discharge their duties. Dalit women, who are predominantly landless, agricultural, and seasonal laborers, are often unaware of their functions and responsibilities in Gram Panchayats. The involvement of local elites in Panchayats may limit the political space provided to Dalits through reservation, as they face economic backwardness, social

inferiority, and political ignorance. Dalit leadership is often limited to their community, and Dalit women may not find a place in the village power hierarchy to address social issues.

Conclusion

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 aimed to empower Dalits, a socially, culturally, and politically excluded group. Over a million Dalits and women have been empowered, with the Gram Sabha persuading them to stand for elections. This has led to a decentralization of power and decision-making, with reservations granted to lower castes to democratize Panchayats and prevent them from being controlled by influential rural elites. The attitude of elected Dalit representatives has changed significantly within Panchayats and among villagers, a change that has never been seen before. The reorganization of PRI's has significantly changed the perception of Dalits in Panchayats. The effective participation of Dalit in decision making is crucial for their better educational and economic attainments. They should be oriented for better political socialization and capacity building programs, enabling them to play their role as voters, movers of political activities, and elected representatives. This orientation is necessary for their political motivation and value orientation to contribute to electoral processes and developmental activities.

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