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## **Role of Cognitive Biases in the Political Sphere of Mizoram**

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### **ABSTRACT**

All facets of political processes need to be taken into consideration in the study of politics. This includes the actions of voters and politicians whose political decisions have far reaching effects on our social and economic life. Mizoram's unique socio-cultural landscape, shaped by its ethnic and religious framework plays a crucial role in political behaviour of its residents. The study looks into the interrelations between political decisions and factors influencing them, through concepts like culture-social identity theory, confirmation bias, availability heuristic, and motivated reasoning.

Mizoram, formerly referred to as Lushai Hills, proclaimed an Indian state on 20th February, 1987, is a secluded state located in the north-eastern part of India with a majority of the population adhering to Christianity. The democratic feature of the country enables its citizen to support political parties and in making political decisions that align with their beliefs. The people of Mizoram have always been driven by a sense of community and cooperation. Networks of conservative civil societies have a strong presence and considerable influence in the socio-cultural dynamics of the Mizo society. The influence of the Church and civil societies greatly impact the society's political engagement and orientation. Political attitudes and actions of the Mizos are often shaped by their ethnic and regional identities and historical narratives, leading individuals to have their allegiance to parties that resonate with these aspects. Individuals are also prone to conforming to the beliefs and behaviour of the social group they belong to. Selective exposure to information through news sources, social media feeds, and other channels, reinforcing their own beliefs are also ways in which individuals stay committed to certain parties and are resistant to other ideologies and parties. Examining of the differences in information processing and root determinants influencing political behaviour through psychological variables can help in understanding voting pattern and in identifying influence factors and their role in shaping and moulding political attitude and orientation. The study can also be beneficial in building political communication amidst increasing political polarisation and rise of misinformation. The research is done through structured questionnaires to collect quantitative data and an analysis of scholarly articles which provided insights relevant to the study.

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### **History of Mizoram**

The Mizos lived in units of villages where the central head was the Chief. The Chief was usually advised by elders known as Val Upa. The village was under the administration of the Chief who also had the judicial authority to settle disputes and criminal cases. The Mizo society was characterised by the structural division of labour and people who exceeded the majority of the population in mental and physical capabilities were placed in high regards. <sup>i</sup> The Mizos have historically been a close knit society, driven by a sense of camaraderie and mutual aid. The culture of Mizos and collective way of living seems to have been inculcated through the guidance of Pu Kawlha and six other Sailo chiefs in Selesih, with their village of 7000 households strong, established their influence among the other tribes. Their sheer magnitude and strength became a beacon for other chiefs in the administration of their own villages. <sup>ii</sup>

Formal education and Christianity entered Mizoram and social life drastically changed. Existing entities like Zawlbuk, chieftainship and various practices were abolished. Political awareness brought about political change and this led to the formation of political parties. The first political party Mizo Commoners Union, later renamed Mizo Union was established in 1946 who won Mizoram's first general election in 1972. Influential civil societies like the YMA (Young Mizo Association), MHIP (Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl), etc emerged. <sup>iii</sup> These civil societies play a policing role in safeguarding the traditions and practices of the society. Their actions strive towards ensuring the interest of the community and their views tend to align with conservative principles. These institutions can have profound impact on the political behaviour of the people in Mizoram.

Political behaviour can be a by product of political socialization. Our social environment can have a prominent impact on our attitude towards politics and how we engage with it. However, there are other factors that may detach an individual from the values and beliefs he was socialized into. An individual's innate cognitive ability to problem solving, personal experiences and emotions derived from it, developing of critical thinking skills, and exposure to new information, can all play an influential role in the development of political behaviour.

## Cognitive bias

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term cognitive has its origin in Latin, from the word *cognit-* which meant getting to know, acquaintance, knowledge.<sup>iv</sup> Cognition covers a set of all mental abilities related to knowledge, memory, reasoning, problem solving, decision making, and other processes and can take place at both conscious and unconscious levels. <sup>v</sup> Cognitive bias can refer to cases in which human cognition reliably produces representation that are systematically distorted compared to some aspect of objective reality.<sup>vi</sup> Human beings are prone to make decisions that are often an interplay of both external influences and internal factors. External influences may encompass social environmental elements that include family, friends, educational institutions, and cultural norms. While these external factors exert significant influence, cognitive processes like personal beliefs and preferences, has on many levels, played a pivotal role in influencing decision-making process. Grasping the concept of psychological mechanisms underpinning political behaviour is crucial in the attempt to understand how political information is processed, how political attitudes and decisions are formed, which can ultimately help in analysing voting behavior and political activism.

It is important to explore certain concepts and psychological mechanisms at play in influencing human behaviour in a political setting where at times, social dynamics occupies a key role in how individuals organize themselves and interpret information from that platform. The magnitude of the influence people in number or in groups have over the behaviour of an individual is an important factor that needs to be explored.

## Social Identity Theory

Social Identity refers to the aspect of the individual's self concept that comes from the knowledge of belonging to a social group along with the emotional significance given to the affiliation to said group.<sup>vii</sup> Being part of a group involves cognitive recognition of that identity and creates emotional connection to its being and its beliefs. The stronger the attachment to the group, the more their behaviour reflects the values of the group.<sup>viii</sup> The intensity of an individual's attachment to his social group generates heightened radicalism and prejudice, cultivating a sense of in-group favouritism and bias against those outside the group. The study of Social Identity Theory is essential in the approach of understanding how political expression is shaped by an individual's ethnic, religious or group identity.<sup>ix</sup> People have a tendency to group themselves based on similarities, and social categorization can occur based on both prominent and minor common features like race, ethnicity, language, age, gender, ideology, interests, etc. Such groupings tend to produce preferential bias and in-group partiality. <sup>x</sup> The implications of a test done by Keith E. Schnakenberg suggest that group identity affects political expression as well as social interaction. Members of a group tend to differentiate their groups from other groups through 'positive distinctiveness'.<sup>xi</sup>

Mizoram's social landscape has historically been shaped by ethnic or group identities strengthened by common ancestry. Clan and tribal affiliations had been central to their identity, dictating their social, political and economic structure. These clan segregations would cultivate a sense of community and loyalty to their group among its members. Although these divisions have significantly diminished today, it is important to recognize the magnitude of the role group affiliations played in Mizo society in creating communal life and identity, cultivating a pronounced sense of 'us and them' dynamic. High social cohesion and maintaining cultural integrity has been a driving force in the Mizo society which can be seen in the way relationships with non-Mizo individuals or groups are navigated. Numerous civil societies in Mizoram are often earnest advocates for the preservation of tradition and culture. These civil societies have a significant hold on the political and social functioning of the community. The church, as a prominent institution in the Mizo community is a big contributor to political discourse and decision making processes. Churches wield considerable influence in how people, who integrate religious beliefs into their daily lives, perceive and approach social and political issues. These factors cannot be neglected as they can be of a substantial influence in the analysis of political behaviour.

An example of this can be seen when Mizoram underwent state elections in November 2023 and the MZP (Mizo Zirlai Pawl), a student organisation had organised a protest against female candidates who were married to non-Mizos, although the candidates were Mizo themselves. <sup>xii</sup> The MZP proclaimed their commitment to preserving the Mizo cultural identity and were adamant that positions of administration should be reserved for Mizos. This stance reflects the organisation's ongoing theme of cultural preservation. There have been a handful of similar cases where people in positions of power are questioned and called out by some organisations on issues of non-Mizos acquiring government jobs. Mizos are often driven by their communal bond. However, this strong sense of group cohesion can inadvertently cultivate exclusivity, creating a barrier for welcoming external perspectives and insights.

The table given below highlights the attitudes of Mizo people on their relationship with Non-Mizos in Mizoram.

Table 1.1

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Non- mizos face discrimination in Mizoram.	54.8%	28.6%	2.4%	14.3%	0%
It is important to marry within the Mizo community.	14.3%	21.4%	4.8%	35.7%	23.8%
Voting for a candidate from outside the Mizo Community is acceptable if they are qualified.	0%	23.8%	9.5%	47.6%	19%

I support policies/ manifestos of political parties even though I do not have much knowledge about it.	7%	20.9%	11.6%	20.9%	39.5%
I cast my vote to the political party I support, regardless of the candidate.	4.7%	18.6%	4.7%	41.9%	30.2%

The above table addresses a prominent issue within the Mizo community where 54.8% of the total respondents strongly agree that they are discriminated against by Non-Mizos in Mizoram with 28.6% agreeing, where more than 80% acknowledge some level of discrimination. This issue can have far reaching implications on the political behaviour of the people of Mizoram which can be seen in the responses on the question of whether voting for a qualified candidate from outside the Mizo community is acceptable with 0% strongly agreeing, 23.8% agreeing and the majority disagreeing. Non-Mizos in the community are less likely to participate or engage in political activities if they perceive that the political system is biased against them.

Cultural preservation and protection of identity has always been a fundamental matter. It has been deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the people of Mizoram and although there have been a slightly more progressive stance on integration with people from outside the community among the younger generations, there is still a strong attachment to the cultural distinctiveness of the Mizos that is still deeply regarded. Political parties have also taken numerous stances on emphasizing the protection of the cultural identity of the people of Mizoram which has consistently garnered the public's support. This issue can be analysed with Social Identity Theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner where in group favoritism is evidently depicted and bias against out group is observed. Individuals derive significance in the formation of their self-identity in the larger social structure through the social group they belong to and their identification with the groups shape their attitudes and perception. Upholding tradition and preserving culture lies central to the beliefs of the Mizos, as these practices are the cornerstone of their personal and collective identity. Their strong affiliation to the group prioritizes the well-being of members within the group before any consideration is given to those outside of the group. This can navigate political behaviour of the Mizos to have a bias against out group individuals who can be deemed as threats to their interests.

In case of the social group being party identification, the individual who is devoted to his social group, engages more in its activities like attending political meetings, rallies and consistent voting of the said group. Table 1.1 highlights that 27.9% of the total respondents are adamant on supporting manifestos or policies of political parties they favour even without sufficient knowledge about said policies and 23.3 % are willing to vote for their championed political party regardless of the qualification and merits of the candidate. Social Identity Theory proposes that when people categorize themselves into groups, they are more than likely to conform to the ideas and structure of the group, becoming a crucial part of their self concept. They often see themselves as members or advocates of particular political parties. Social Identity theory looks into the psychological aspect of political behaviour and Steven Greene(1999) stated through his study that the traditional view of how much a person favors a political party directly influencing his bias towards the party, was just the surface level and that an individual who places a particular party as a core part of his social identity amplifies his support towards the party, which can often result in extreme attitudes. The tendency of an individual to support policies of a political party he supports without thorough understanding and comprehension and his intention to vote for political parties he favors without assessment of the candidate's status emphasizes the need to show his allegiance to the group he identifies with and would do so without evaluation of any information that could disrupt his views about the group. This is a key representation of the Social Identity Theory which drastically affects decision making skills, and their role in the political landscape of Mizoram. However, a significant portion of the respondents disagree, taking on a more informed and critical approach that is also very crucial in the maintenance of a more balanced and well- functioning democratic system.

The hypnotic influence of the mass with its glorified ideas and objectives imparts in an individual, a transformation that changes his whole being. Even a civilized individual can come to have primitive barbaric character under the anonymity of the crowd. <sup>xiii</sup> Individuals, when masked with the anonymity of the crowd, would behave differently than when they are alone. Self categorization theory that evolved from Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory states that individuals who categorize themselves into groups assimilate their individual selves into the behaviour of the group. Identifying with a group changes the way they see themselves and others outside the group. An individual's identity becomes closely aligned with the characteristics of the group, driving his behaviour and attitude, and becomes a representative of the group and depersonalizes self identity. Depersonalization produces ethnocentrism, conformity, normative behaviour, in group favouritism and cohesion, cooperation and altruism within the group, and mutual influence. Adapting one's perception with that of the group reduces uncertainty about significant social issues which enhances meaning and confidence in the operation of one's social life. <sup>xiv</sup>

### Confirmation Bias and Availability Heuristic

Confirmation Bias is a psychological term where humans seek out information that confirms their preconceived beliefs rather than entertaining opposing ideas. There can be numerous underpinnings affecting an individual's reasoning for his behaviour where he may combine different pieces of knowledge to back up his desired bias conclusion with the impression that he is rational and fair. So his outcome relies more on his desired view rather than assessment of facts. <sup>xv</sup> Ziva Kunda in her article, highlighted tests done like experimental manipulation which showcased how motivation affected reasoning, and comparative analysis where motivation led to biased assessment of even scientific evidence. Emotional stimuli tend to generate more attention than neutral stimuli.<sup>xvi</sup> Individuals tend to prioritize information that captures our attention which can either be positive or negative, and those that do not evoke emotion are easily overlooked and disregarded. It is important to keep in mind that how ambiguous information or situation is interpreted depends on the individual based on their difference in cognitive characteristics.

Availability heuristic is the tendency of human beings to make decisions based on information that is readily available in their minds due to their frequency or recency. Situation or information that is presented regularly is often easily remembered. A heuristic is a mental short cut that guides our decisions and decisions are often made by drawing information that comes easily to one's consciousness.<sup>xvii</sup> Recurring display of information is often interpreted as significant as it actually is which may lead to distorted view of reality. This can often result in making short viewed and unevaluated decision-making. Social media and further approaches made for more accessible information has had several prominent impacts on political polarization through its algorithmic mechanism. Many of these platforms would lay out contents that align with the user's existing beliefs and attitude creating a larger echo chamber that contribute to cementing their opinions and perceptions. It has also become a great tool for political parties and institutions to further extend their influence. The emergence of algorithmic mechanisms where flow of information can be controlled, often impacting their political decisions and behaviours.

A questionnaire was distributed to 100 respondents to explore their political attitude and their process of interpreting information to gain more insight into the role of cognitive bias in decision-making. Their responses are summarised below-

Table 1.2

Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I pay more attention to news articles about the political party I support.	23.3%	23.3%	4.7%	30.2%	18.6%
I engage in political discussions with those that have differing perspectives from my own.	2.3%	67.4%	2.3%	27.9%	0%
I am more likely to remember information that supports my political views	9.3%	48.8%	23.3%	7%	11.6%
I find it difficult to be with someone who does not share my views	4.7%	27.9%	7%	27.9%	34.9%
I find it difficult to change my views when presented with new information contradicting my previous beliefs	11.6%	27.9%	2.3%	48.8%	9.3%

From Table 1.2, we can see the evidence of how confirmation bias may play a role in influencing the political decisions and attitudes of the people in Mizoram. Regarding the question of whether people paid more attention to news or information about the party they support, the response was divided with 46.6% agreeing and 48.8% disagreeing. It can be said that there is, to a certain degree, selective exposure to information that reaffirms existing beliefs without engaging in opposing ideas or information. This narrows down one's ideological boundaries and amplifies political divide among the people. On the other hand, there is also a substantial amount of openness where people are willing to entertain differing viewpoints, prying open the space for discourse, and reassessment of existing perceptions. This can also be seen on the responses of whether people are willing to engage with others of the opposing views, where majority of the people agreed to do so. 58.1% of the total respondents agreed that they are more likely to remember positive information about their political biases while only 18.6% disagreed. This is a fundamental aspect of confirmation bias where information provided about preconceived ideas are validated and information challenging their views are often ignored or disregarded, resulting into more polarised views and leading to the emergence of echo chambers.<sup>xviii</sup> Favoring information and memory bias makes it increasingly challenging to change one's views and beliefs. 32.6% and 39.5% of the respondents find it difficult to engage with people with differing views and to change their views even when presented with information contradicting their previous beliefs. Limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and opinions is an attribute of the influence of social identity.

## Conclusion

The influence of cognitive bias in decision making and in impacting political attitude presents substantial challenges for the people in Mizoram. The study presents how some biases lead to favor information that reaffirms existing beliefs, with an indifference towards ideas opposing their own which significantly impacts political behaviour and can even promote partisanship among the masses. Biases often lead to selective exposure of information, gravitation towards information or contents that align with their opinions, reinforcing their beliefs. In the context of Mizoram, the cultural preservation and conservative mindset has often led to social bias and in group favoritism, shaped by its historical narratives and the significance placed in its ethnic identity. The data showed varied responses on how people engage with political issues although a strong sense of communal bias is seen on how relationships with people from outside the community are dealt with. The study also showcased a significant amount of willingness for political discourse and openness to new ideas.

Although the study provided valuable insights into how the psychological mechanisms influence the behaviour of the people of Mizoram in a political sphere, there were certain shortcomings and limitations that needed to be taken into consideration. The study was conducted primarily on residents from the capital city Aizawl with only around 15% from rural areas where the results could vary considerably due to difference in social landscape in terms of access to information, education and exposure to diverse ideas. The study was done on 100 respondents which would not accurately represent the

whole population of the state and does not adequately reflect the diversity of the state. A possibility of respondents not accurately representing their desired views due to sensitivity of the subject is also to be considered.

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