

Urban India Feels Alienated from Their Local Elected Representatives: Report

A report by Primus Partners reveals a concerning disconnect between urban citizens and their municipal representatives



Read on: <https://www.businessworld.in/article/urban-india-feels-alienated-from-their-local-elected-representatives-report-554756>

A recent report by Primus Partners revealed that 78 per cent of urban residents perceive a disconnect between themselves and their municipal representatives. This sense of alienation manifests in civic disengagement, with 38 per cent of respondents either abstaining from voting or selecting NOTA (None of the Above) in their last municipal elections. Such trends indicate a broader disillusionment with local self-governance, seen not as a mechanism for collective advancement but merely as a bureaucratic formality.

One of the most telling revelations is that 70 per cent of citizens are either unaware of or unable to participate in formal citizen engagement platforms such as Ward Sabhas. These forums, mandated to facilitate dialogue between representatives and the public, often exist only on paper or are substituted by inefficient and informal digital exchanges. Furthermore, 63 per cent of respondents said they find it difficult to even approach their local representatives. In most cases, communication is limited to complaint redressal, rather than meaningful discussions on development planning.

Transparency remains a major concern. The survey found that 82 per cent of respondents are unaware of the budget of their municipal body, while 55 per cent admitted they did not know of any development activity occurring in their own neighbourhoods. This lack of accessible information, coupled with poor engagement, has led to widespread dissatisfaction—87 per cent of citizens expressed discontent or had no knowledge of how to communicate with their representatives.

What is equally alarming is the perception of municipal services themselves. Citizens increasingly view basic civic services such as water, sanitation, and roads as commodities paid for—rather than as community-managed assets requiring active civic participation. This consumer mindset discourages collaborative governance and weakens civic responsibility, further deepening the gap between elected leaders and the communities they serve.

In light of these findings, Primus Partners has recommended a six-pronged strategy to repair the frayed ties between citizens and their local governments. These include demystifying governance through targeted outreach campaigns, building the capacity of elected leaders with structured training, reviving defunct community forums like Ward Committees, and establishing transparent civic trails through digitisation of governance records. Additionally, the report suggests introducing citizen-led tools to evaluate municipal performance and fostering crowdsourced, collaborative governance models that make citizens equal partners in decision-making.

The report also points to a fundamental flaw in the perception and functioning of municipalities in India. While they are constitutionally mandated to perform 18 key functions under the 74th Amendment, their role is still largely confined to being service providers, rather than strategic planners of urban growth. In many cases, the dominance of state-level actors and parastatal agencies further erodes the visibility and effectiveness of municipal representatives.

Primus Partners calls for a paradigm shift. To truly empower India's cities—home to the bulk of the country's GDP—the relationship between citizens and elected representatives must evolve beyond the ballot box. It must be nurtured in the periods between elections, through continuous dialogue, co-governance platforms, and shared accountability. India's urban future, the report argues, cannot rest on infrastructure alone; it must be built on trust, inclusivity, and citizen partnership.