



# Brand love and party preference of young political consumers (voters)

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## Abstract

The study has examined the influence of political brand love on young voters' political party preferences. By examining the impact of political brand love on party preference, this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between party brand love and other relational constructs like brand trust, social self, and inner self on party preference. The results as a whole show that both brand trust and brand love have a significant positive impact on brand preference. A higher degree of party brand trust leads to higher party preference both directly and when both direct and indirect effects are considered as a whole. Brand love increases party preference both directly and indirectly through inner self and social self. It implies that young voters' attitudes towards political parties become more positive if brand love reinforces their inner and social self. A higher degree of trust, on the other hand, influences party choice irrespective of natural or socially acceptable choices. Additionally, the study reveals that the gender of the young voters does not influence the choice of a political party preference. This study may motivate political marketers to inculcate love quotient inside political brands by adapting suitable communication and voter connect strategies as the same shapes young voters' trust and voting preference.

**Keywords** Political marketing · Emerging market · Brand love · Brand trust · Inner self · Social self

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## 1 Introduction

In a democracy, voters can elect but not affect policies (Besley 2006; Merlo 2006). Thus, the only means at their disposal is to prefer and elect the politician or the party brand most likely to satisfy them (Padovano 2013). The importance of voter-political party relationships becomes relevant due to increasing competition among different political party brands. A strong political party brand ensures a better-connected relationship between the party brand and the voters. As the political market is becoming more competitive, it is becoming challenging for political parties to retain existing voters' support and garner new supporters. From a political marketing strategy point of view, analyzing factors impacting voters' party preferences is critical for political parties. Recent studies propagate that consumers can experience a feeling of love for their brand (Albert et al. 2008; Batra et al. 2012). Brand love is the degree of solid emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand. The political brand creates a unique identity to differentiate the party brand from other political parties. The presence of political brand love may play a crucial role in the process of identity creation. Voters' intense love feelings for a particular political party may influence their party brand preference and lead to party loyalty and voting intention. As the preference for a political brand is a complex decision, political brand love can direct voters' preferences toward political brands. If electorates love a political party, they prefer the party more than rival party brands.

Past researchers studied brand love extensively in the context of the consumer market. However, we know little about the role of party brand love in the context of political marketing. There is a scarcity of studies examining voters' love toward political brands. Moreover, brand love has still not been studied as a way of influencing the preference of voters. The area is relevant for further investigation, given the growing rivalry among political brands while luring voters. Against this backdrop, this study examines the influence of party brand love on voters' political party preferences. As brand love is a relational construct, the study investigates the causal relationship between brand love and related constructs. Study results may provide valuable information about the role of brand love in shaping voters' preferences about a political brand. The findings may help political parties to plan their future strategies for shaping voter party preference.

## 2 Research background and proposed hypotheses

### 2.1 Political marketing and branding

Citizens' selections of political parties follow a similar consumer's brand selection process (Reeves et al. 2006; Schweiger & Adami 1999). Of late, political parties are using marketing tools and techniques to positively position the political party and its leaders in voters' minds to channelize votes for the party (Newman

2012). Political marketing is defined as the application of different marketing techniques and concepts by political parties to achieve the goals of the political organization (Ingram & Lees-Marshment 2002). The political marketing paradigm has three distinctive orientations namely selling (focuses on party policies), instrument mix (focuses on voters need), and relationship building (focuses on voter and societal need) (Vankov 2013).

Political consumers have knowledge structures of political parties in much the same way they have for brands (Schweiger & Adami 1999). Voters choose political parties quite the same way as consumers make their choices about brands (Reeves et al. 2006). It may not be common to view politicians or political parties as brands, there are clear similarities (Lloyd 2005). The brand of a party or candidate provides a short cut for the voter which means they may not need to search for more detailed information regarding key policy issues (Lilleker 2015). Downer (2016) advocates that in brand-saturated western societies, parties and politicians are showcased as brands and voters increasingly treat them as brands. A political brand is defined as an associative network of interconnected political information and attitudes (Smith 2005). Scammell (2015) propagates that the brand concept is a powerful tool for understanding political images and brand as a concept can bring together the economic and the aesthetic, rational choice and cultural resonance. Political brands transfer expectations and propositions attached to them to influence the thought process of voters (Banerjee & Ray Chaudhuri 2016). The political brand is an intangible product bundle, and most voters have to judge on the overall packaged concept or message as held in memory (Lock & Harris 1996; Smith 2005). Major sources for the development of political brand knowledge structure are: the brand value of party itself, policies, leader, and profile of political candidate, issues, and constituency-focused service delivery (O’Cass 2003; O’Shaughnessy & Henneberg 2007). However, the intensity of other elements influences political brand preference and voting intention. Smith and French (2009) argue that the brand’s importance can change depending on the presence of political competitors, the leader, its ability to keep promises and its perceived importance. As brands can signal reassurance of quality and promise (Feldwick 2002), nurturing a political party as a brand helps to improve party preference and loyalty (Banerjee & Ray Chaudhuri 2016). Political brand plans for brand differentiation by proposing its identity. Accordingly, voters develop political brand preferences based on their understanding of a particular party brand in comparison to others. The same influences to their voting intentions.

## 2.2 Focal constructs

Based on an extensive literature survey, we have proposed four focal constructs influencing political brand preference of electorates namely political brand love, political brand trust, inner self and social self. Muraoka et al. (2021) find that the political parties receive systematically different proportions of love and angry reactions depending on their ideology, party family, and populist orientation. Brand love in our context can thus be defined as a deep affection towards a political entity or candidate which makes one look beyond their personal

preferences and make them believe in party ideology. Political trust can be looked at in relation to ideology. Further, its link to knowledge-based institutions like universities, government controlled broadcasting and other media has also been explored (Saarinen et al. 2019). Thus, political brand trust is defined as the voters' willingness to rely on the ability of the party brand. Trust in political party brand is the confidence of the electorate about the expectations held about them formed through long association. Brand enhances the social self or reflects the inner self (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). Self is sustained through socialisation or in case socially constructed self through inter-group dynamics (Monroe et al 2000). Inner self in this context is a human trait held within which may not be revealed but carefully nurtured and is fulfilled once matching attributes are found. Social self are the traits which are held desirable in a social context. These are more common traits across individuals thought to be suitable in a societal context. To exploit the role of inner self and social self, political parties can take advantage of pre-existing groups by identifying traits which can help them draw the populace towards their ideology. Moreover, latent traits across groups may be identified to form coalitions across pre-existing groups. Here places which commonly draw people from diverse backgrounds can be tapped. Clubs, offices, sports teams are some examples of such gatherings.

The relationships among constructs like brand love, brand trust, inner self, social self and brand preference are previously examined in commercial marketing. However, we are investigating various inter-construct relationships in the context of the political market for the first time. The combined effect of these key associations may influence electorates' party preferences. Thus, the objective is to investigate the type of causal relationship that exists among those sources. Figure 1 incorporates our proposed concepts into a model comprising

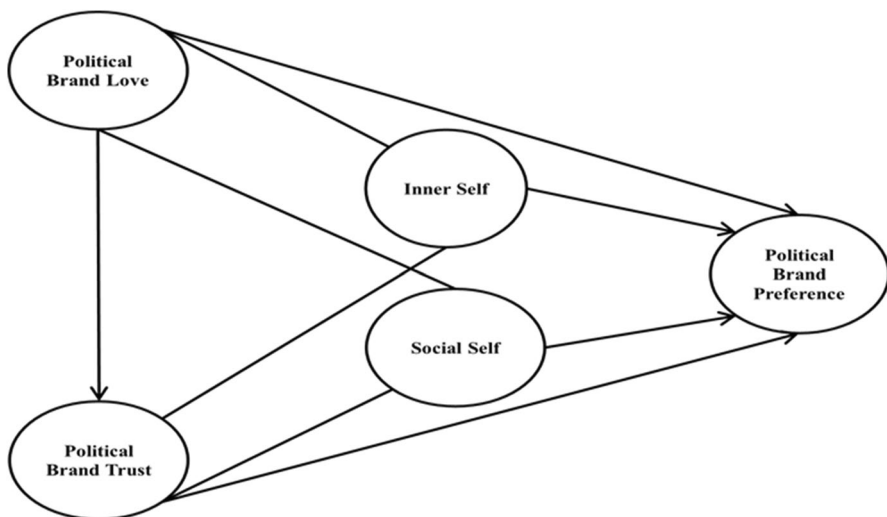


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

proposed causal relationship. The sections below present detailed discussion on proposed constructs and hypothesized relationships.

### 2.3 Political brand love

Brand love is viewed as a psychological process that can occur toward people, ideas, activities, and objects (Ahuvia et al. 2009). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) view that consumer feels love for the brand when a brand reaches both an actual and desired level of integration with her sense of self. Brand love includes passion and declarations of love for the brand. Loved brands also enhance positive image and attitude towards them (Albert et al. 2008). Consumers who love a brand are more likely to maintain their engagement over time (Ahuvia 2005). Palsuk et al. (2019) recently conceptualize brand love as an intense emotional connection characterized by intimacy, passion, and commitment developed over time.

Though there are a number of excellent works from the business literature examining the concept of brand love and its application, exploration of the same in the area of political market is rather scarce, though it has a considerable relevance for political marketers. Love in politics can be looked at from the point of view of patriotism (love for country) and in contrast to that ‘love for party’ (Zmora 2004). In Machiavellian terms individuals are selfish beings and they may restrain their self, influenced by patriotic feelings. Given their negative nature they would expect others to also follow the suit. There is a long term benefit to resorting to self-restraint over short run costs. Due to short-sightedness most of the individuals instead would shift to ‘love for party’ where sacrifices are much less and at least the supporters of that political entity follows the suit. Affection towards a party can be as a consequence of love. In Political Science literature, affection for parties has been looked at as a combination of utilitarian, cultural and participatory factors (Pears 2017). An individual may develop affection towards a party or candidate due to perceived tangible benefits. Shared history can create affection towards party or candidates propagating cultural connect and so worthy of being loved. Voting as a participatory process on the other hand creates affection due to awareness required about common goals. It creates coalitions based on idea about desired aims. In some cases, love has also become a tool of propaganda (Guo 2020) to make people enthusiastic about the political system and give that preference over one’s own feelings. As brand love exists primarily at the individual level, voters may also be governed by them and develop their love for a preferred political party. Recently, Muraoka et al. (2021) find that the political parties receive systematically different proportions of love and angry reactions depending on their ideology, party family, and populist orientation. More extreme parties tend to elicit relatively greater emotional responses. Banerjee’s (2021) recent work finds that love as a relational construct plays a crucial role in shaping young voters’ political brand preference. A higher level of love for a political party stimulates voters’ trust in the party brand.

### 3 Direct effects

#### 3.1 Political brand love and brand preference

In political market context, a lovable party brand is the one which we prefer right away without needing to find alternatives. In a competitive political market, it is a delight to political marketers if their party brand can establish this connection. For the service industry, a positive service experience forms brand love and results in thankfulness and a feeling of the championship (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh 2012). This argument may hold for the political market as it has more commonality with a service experience. Voters may develop a genuine love, though one-sided, for political brands. For a voter, as the party preference involves decision-making complexity, political brand love can direct voters' preference towards it. Banerjee (2021) advocates that political brand love of electorates mediate the relationship between the brand community and the brand preference. Thus, political marketers should increase young voters' love for the party to increase their political party preference (Banerjee 2021). Accordingly, in the political market, satisfied voters who also have a love for the party are inclined towards them during the election. Thus, political brand love works as an antecedent of party preference. If voters love any particular political party, they may prefer the same party irrespective of factors like anti-incumbency or vigorous campaigning by the opponents. Party brand love is likely to boost the preference of the voters for the political party they love. As a result, political brand love and political brand preference are expected to be positively related. Thus, we may propose:

**H1** Political brand love has a positive influence on political brand preference.

#### 3.2 Political brand trust and brand preference

Trust is advocated as an essential antecedent of commitment in relational marketing studies (Garbarino & Johnson 1999; Morgan & Hunt 1994). Trust significantly increase confidence and strengthen the consumer-brand relationship by lowering the uncertainty and risk perception in purchasing behavior (Elliot & Yannopoulos 2007). Brand trust reduces unnecessary complexity and leads to purchase intention (Gefen 2000). Accordingly, political brand trust becomes instrumental in framing consumer's political brand preferences.

Political trust denotes institutional trust, including compliance with governmental authority and voting behavior (Hetherington 1998; Scholz & Lubell 1998). Political brand trust broadly depends on the party brand, leader, and candidate (French & Smith 2010; O'Shaughnessy & Henneberg 2007). Trust can also be related to one's belief and ones' view about different institutions and agencies which disseminates information. Such information provided by educational or research institutions vis-à-vis others like government owned media impacts trust (Saarinen et al. 2019). In multi-party systems a kind of accumulation of trust has been observed. Supporters

of popular party are seen to have less trust in all kinds of knowledge-based institutions. A strong relationship has been unearthed between political trust and such institutions. Further, this link has been found to be very strong among popular party supporters compared to others. In terms of demographic differences related to traits of political candidates interesting outcomes are observed (Valgarðsson et al. 2020). Journalists and young people have less distrust in general and are more likely to prefer competency of leaders over other traits. Politicians, older people and males on the other hand prefer integrity more than other traits. Among distrusting citizens younger voters, labour voters and non-voters care more for authenticity than other traits of leaders. An influential study shows that the causation doesn't run from dissatisfaction with political party to distrust rather the other way round (Hetherington 1998). It has been emphasised that in such a milieu it is very difficult for political leaders to garner votes. Quintelier (2007) viewed that young voters have little political knowledge and lack confidence and trust in political parties. The higher intensity of the party preference is linked with the more significant amount of trust in the party (Komiak & Benbasat 2006). The rationale behind it is that a higher degree of trust specifies decisive voters' confidence in the political party to fulfil their wish lists. Trust is vital in any relationship, and since voters and political brands are related, brand trust is essential to ensure brand preference (Bauer 1996). Based on the above argument, we would like to examine whether their trust in a particular party determines young voters' preference. Higher the trust a young voter has on a political party higher is the expected influence on that party's brand even in the face of significant efforts by other parties to grab his/her attention. Thus, the following hypothesis proposed is:

**H2** Political brand trust has a positive influence on political brand preference.

### 3.3 Political brand love and brand trust

Brand love demands solid feelings, and the same evolves through brand experiences. Brand trust is based on consumer expectations regarding reliability, altruism, and honesty (Albert & Merunka 2013). Brand love and brand trust both imply a stable connection between the brand and the consumers. Sternberg (1986) observed that individuals in love associate trust and commitment with their partners. As a feeling of trust typically exists between the two partners in love (Regan et al. 1998), it can be assumed that brand love is an antecedent of brand trust. Consumers who love the brand develop more trust in it. One may argue the same for party brands. In practice, there is a time lag between first-time purchases and repeat purchases of a political brand. Usually, for a national election, a voter has to wait for four-five long years for a repeat purchase because the national election in a democratic country typically happens in an interval of 4/5 years. The same holds true for local municipality, and state-level elections. Consequently, voters do not develop feelings of love for a political party at first sight, and their love grows slowly, observing the performance of the political party. A person growing up in a specific political party household may develop political orientation and that may influence his/her party adoption process.

However, intense emotions like love is very personal to one individual, the growth of the same takes place slowly through different level of interactions. The gradual increase in brand love evolves through voters' experience with the brand over time.

Moreover, in the context of young voters, a higher level of love for a party arouses young voters' trust in the party (Banerjee 2021). This can be through direct engagement or based on observations. First-time voters may be neutral initially about their feelings for the party, but over times develop a love for the party because of their favorable experiences. Political party trust refers to voters' expectations about the party's reliability to fulfil its promises. Love for a party may direct young voters positively, like trust in the party, provided that the experiences continue to be favourable (Banerjee 2021). Once a voter develops a feeling of love for a party and they observe their performance it most likely will lead to higher brand trust. Thus, we propose:

**H3** Political brand love has a positive influence on political brand trust.

## 4 Mediating effects

### 4.1 Inner self and social self

The relationship between a brand and a consumer can express an individual's self-identity (Escalas & Bettman 2005). The self stands for a person as a whole and includes personality, personal beliefs, feelings, experiences, and the regulatory self (Leary & Tangney 2011). Besides, self-knowledge formation develops through social interactions and is the outcome of language and self-reflection (Owens 2006). Individual can be looked at distinctly from others or possessing similarities with fellow beings. Self can be persistent through one's mixing with fellow beings. In case one sees him/her self as fashioned by society itself then across-group interactions become paramount in sustaining their traits (Monroe et al 2000). Brand relationships provide personal identity and social identity functions and rewards (Fournier 1998). A brand can mirror the inner self or accentuate one's social self (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). Consumers develop a symbolic connection with their loveable brand and recognize strong connections between the brand's and their own identity, known as consumers' self-concept (Palusuk et al. 2019; Sirgy et al. 2008). Consumers may encounter risks involving threats to their inner self/social self-identity when using inappropriate brands (Berger & Heath 2008).

When a brand score is high both in the actual and desired level of assimilation with the consumer's sense of self, the consumer feels love for the brand (Ahuvia, 1993). Consumers' love is greater towards self-expressive brands that fit with their identity (Park et al. 2010). Self-expressive denotes how a consumer perceives whether a specific brand enhances the consumer's social self and reflects the inner self (Ahuvia et al. 2009; Karjaluoto et al. 2016). Consumers prefer to use brands to shape their identities to define themselves (Malär et al. 2011). When consumers use brands to help create their inner self and social identities, this requires estimating the extent of fit between the brand's communicated imagery and consumers' desired



identity (Swaminathan et al. 2007). Thus, voter's love for the political party brand influences political brand choice through reflection of a voter's inner traits. More the love for the party is due to it being a reflection of one's inner self higher would be the political brand preference. Hence one may hypothesise:

**H4** Voters' political brand love significantly influences political brand preference through the inner self.

When consumers' identity fits products/brands, brand love emerges (Ahuvia 2005). The self of a consumer is of prime importance: what he/she feels about the brand and perceives it to be. As choosing a brand is one way of expressing and defining who someone is as a person, a consumer achieves this by the kind of products he/she uses. An individual looks at the degree to which the brand reflects one's own identity and the extent to which the contemplated brand reflects one's social self in the face of an individual's surroundings. Brand love involves integrating the brand into the consumer's inner and social self and includes a willingness to declare love. Accordingly, if a voter's social self is influenced by love for the party it's expected that such voters would have a higher preference for such political brands. Thus, one may hypothesise that:

**H5** Voters' political brand love significantly influences political brand preference through the social self.

Consumers feel passionate love for a brand when it reflects their inner-self. Brand love is a less intense feeling for the brand's enhancement of the consumer's social-self. Inner-self becomes more influential in creating passionate feelings toward the brand as the relationship grows. As the relationship matures, the significance of social-self diminishes (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). The same may be applicable to brand trust. In the context of mobile phone consumers, He et al. (2012) found that consumers with self-expressive solid brand identification are more likely to develop trust and perceive the brand to be of high value. Research has found trust to arise from identity-based sources (Tyler 2001).

Voters form perceptions of party brands based on what they see the parties say and do overtime (Fortunato & Stevenson 2013). For a political party or candidate, the style, content, and the accessibility of their communication work as important signifiers by which potential voters can evaluate proximity to the self (Lilleker 2015). A voter feels closest to the party he/she thinks is identical to his/her self, relative to other parties, as a part of his/her social identity (Green et al. 2004). Similarly, a voter will have the highest affinity for the party he/she thinks he/she most resembles relative to other parties (Lupu, 2014). Accordingly, a voter's love for a party is determined by the fit between the voter's self-image, inner self, and social self and his/her image of the party brand. Therefore, love for the party and resultant trust increase as voters perceive themselves to fit with the image of the party more closely. When a voter loves a brand, he/she tries to integrate the characteristics of it into his/her own inner and social self. The brand serves as self-expression as well

as differentiation from other members within the social environment. Hence, voters may prefer a political party to identify themselves in a certain way enabled by the party brand.

As Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) viewed, irrespective of the type of service; trust benefits are the most valued by consumers, as they reduce both the anxiety costs associated with provisions and the level of perceived risk. In the context of the political market, voters need to have their confidence and feel that the party is committed to their interests and requirements. Party trust contributes to providing continuity in the voter-party relationship, which may lead to party preference. However, in the political market, the voter party relationship does not depend on directly perceivable qualities as post-election performance is unpredictable and uncertain. Voters start to have more realistic expectations, which force them to depend more on their trust in a party. Thus, political brand trust can influence political brand preference through a voter's inner self. More the political trust of a voter and higher is the congruence with his/her inner traits higher is the expected influence on political brand preference. Hence, we hypothesise:

**H6** Voters' political brand trust significantly influences political brand preference through the inner self.

Voter's trust in a particular political party may be regulated through his/her understanding of inner and social self. Voter's self may foster rationality between the voters' interests and commitment to the party. Thus, a political brand capable of expressing a voter's desired inner and social self may be viewed as higher in identity-based trust. Accordingly, in our proposed model, both the inner self and the social self represent mediating variables between the two antecedents, brand love and brand trust, to brand preference. More the political party resembles a voter's social self, higher is the expected influence of political party trust on political party brand through such traits. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

**H7** Voters' political brand trust significantly influences political brand preference through the social self.

## 5 Research context and methodology

Political marketing depends on demographic, psychographic, behavioral, and geographic methods (Baines et al. 2003) and is linked with a country's political system (Cwalina et al. 2011). The current study is conducted in India, the largest democracy in the world. The country is predominantly a young adult-dominated democracy. The National Youth Policy of India (2003) defines the youth population in the age group of 15–35 years. (Planning Commission 2008). Around fifty percent of the country's population is below 25 years of age, and the proportion of youth citizens in the Indian population is thirty-five percent (Heslop 2014; Lu et al. 2016).

Young adults of India, including millennials and post-millennials, account for nearly half of the Indian voters, with an estimated population projection of 459 million in 2019 (Census of India 2011). Forty-five million young people have been added to India's electoral roll since 2014 (Election Commission of India 2018). In 2014, voters' participation in the electoral process was almost 66%, and there was the active participation of young and new voters (Basu & Mishra 2014). In the recent election held in 2019, a notable observation was the enthusiastic participation of the young Indian population (Deka 2019). Youth vote banks are a significant concern for political parties, and a proper understanding of Indian young voters' mindset is critical for political marketers (Joshi & Kunduri 2017). Accordingly, young respondents were targeted for this study because their viewpoints are crucial for political strategists.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) viewed love as an experiential consumption tendency that reaches a peak at a young age (Belk et al. 2003). Thus, young Indian voters may also have a strong love for political parties as a whole. Additionally, young adults have the lowest voter turnouts (Bergan 2011). However, Henn et al. (2005) claimed that though young adults are skeptical about the political system and politicians, they are politically aware and support the democratic process. Accordingly, political parties prioritize young voters due to higher levels of perceived responsiveness amongst this age group to political communications (Davidson 2005). As early political participation predicts future electoral involvement (Glasford 2008), luring young voters for political participation can ensure increased voter turnout in the future, and the same is suitable for a democratic political system.

The primary data was collected from young adult respondents (18–35 age bracket) in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal state, India. As the research framework has theoretical underpinnings, non-probability convenience sampling for data collection was followed (Calder et al. 1982). In this type of sampling, the prime consideration is the ease with which potential participants can be located, and participants are selected based on their convenience for the researchers (Baker et al. 2013). The present research was a non-funded academic study. For non-funding research work, convenience sampling was a recommended technique as the same was cheaper and easily implementable (Battaglia 2008). For the selection of respondents, subjective methods like respondents' geographical proximity, access to respondents, and their willingness to participate were used (Dörnyei 2007). Respondents were of 18 and above years of age which was the minimum voting age in India. We had approached a total of 700 respondents, and 500 (response rate: approximately 71 percent) participated in the survey. Out of the same, 436 questionnaires were all complete and used for the analysis (usable rate: approximately 87 percent). For an overall model testing, a minimum sample size of  $50 + 8m$  ( $m$  = number of predictors) is required (Green, 1991). As our model has four predictors, the requisite sample size was 82, and our sample size ( $n=436$ ) was adequate for the analysis. A direct interview method was followed for data collection with the help of a structured questionnaire. The interview was taken on the same day to avoid any information loss or response bias. As our target respondents were young adults, we visited different colleges, universities, food joints, and malls of Kolkata city to ensure their availability. Out of 436 respondents, 62.9 percent of respondents are male, and 37.1 percent are female. As

the sample is a little skewed towards male respondents, we have conducted a multi-group SEM analysis (male/female) to see if there is a difference between the genders in terms of the SEM models in this sample. Regarding educational attainment, qualifications range from plus two (53.9%), graduate (35.8%), and post-graduate/professional (10.3%). The survey mainly captured respondents' views with a basic educational background as it is viewed that school-based civic learning experiences influence young people's political engagement (Kahne & Westheimer 2006; Torney-Purta & Amadeo 2003). Those voters are politically conscious and have greater confidence in their political decision-making capabilities (Pirannejad & Janssen 2019). Occupation ranges from student/unemployed (79%) to service (21.1%). Thus respondents are from varied economic and social backgrounds.

## 6 Measures

In the survey instrument, multi-item indicators were used to measure the constructs. There were no existing scales in the literature that explained the theoretical constructs in the context of the political market. Thus, we adapted the constructs and scales from existing literature with necessary modifications. We measured voter's political brand love by using fourteen items scale developed by Banerjee (2021) from the work of Albert et al. (2009). Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) three items scale was adapted in the context of the political market to measure respondents' inner-self. Similarly, respondents' social self was measured with the help of three items scale developed from Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) work. We measured voter's political brand trust adapted by Banerjee (2021) from the ten items scale proposed by Gurviez and Korchia (2002). Three items political brand preference scale of Banerjee (2021), adapted from Chang and Liu (2009), was used to measure respondents' political party preference. The scale items were measured using seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

We have conducted a pilot test of the questionnaire within a sample of thirty respondents to examine the suitability of the survey instrument (Oppenheim 2000). The study further measured the coefficient alpha to calculate the internal consistency of the questionnaire items. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  range was 0.623 to 0.869 for all variables (> cut-off value of 0.60), and the questionnaire met the required reliability (Streiner 2003; Chow, 2004; Hair et al. 2006). Additionally, as researchers adapted scales developed by past investigators, the survey instrument met the condition of content validity and was thus used for data collection (Table 1 and 2).

## 7 Construct validity and reliability

To conduct exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of data to test the scales validity (Lan-dis et al. 2000), we followed Gonzalez and Bello's (2002) approach of data reduction. The study conducted the principal component analysis, and Eigenvalues > 1 was considered for aggregation purpose. In our study, the loading of all items was > 0.679, as recommended by Churchill and Peter (1984). A significant value of

**Table 1** Construct, scale details, construct validity and reliability

Construct	Scale details	Construct validity and reliability
Political Brand Preference (PBP)	Banerjee (2021), Chang and Liu (2009)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ : 0.623; Variance: 57.15% CR: 0.80; AVE: 0.57
Political Brand Love (PBL)	Banerjee (2021), Albert et al. (2009)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ : 0.79; Variance: 70.92% CR: 0.96; AVE:0.65
Political Brand Trust (PBT)	Banerjee (2021), Gurvitz and Korchia (2002)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ :0.814; Variance:68.78% CR:0.95; AVE:0.64
Inner self (IS)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ : 0.803; Variance: 72.32% CR: 0.89; AVE: 0.72
Social self (SS)	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)	Cronbach's $\alpha$ : 0.869; Variance: 79.78% CR:0.92; AVE:0.80

**Table 2** Construct and factor loading

Construct	Items	Loadings
Political Brand Preference (PBP)	I consider my preferred political brand superior to other competing political brands	0.78
	While considering a political brand for voting, I would go for this political brand first	0.78
	I am not keen to try other political brands for voting	0.70
Political Brand Love (PBL)	I take pleasure in voting for my preferred political brand	0.80
	I take pleasure in discovering new ideas of my preferred political brand	0.86
	I take pleasure following my preferred political brand	0.85
	I am happy to support my preferred political brand	0.71
	I am emotionally connected to my preferred political brand	0.81
	My preferred political brand is of real value to me	0.86
	My relationship with my preferred political brand is almost magical	0.72
My relationship with my preferred political brand is more important to me than anything else	0.84	
	I idealize my preferred political brand	0.87
	I support my preferred political brand for a long time	0.86
	I have not supported other political brand since long	0.82
	I dream about this political brand for a long period	0.78
	I associate this political brand with my childhood dream	0.73
	I dream (have dreamt) to be associated with this political brand	0.80

Table 2 (continued)

Construct	Items	Loadings
Political Brand Trust (PBT)	I associate a feeling of safety with my preferred political brand	0.68
	I trust the political brand I prefer	0.90
	I can guarantee to vote for the political brand I prefer	0.85
	My preferred political brand is sincere with its voters	0.78
	My preferred political brand renews its agenda based on voters' feedback	0.73
	My preferred political brand always endeavours to be responsive to its voters' needs	0.91
	I am ready to make a few sacrifices to keep on choosing this political brand I prefer	0.74
	I am ready to praise my preferred political brand for long-term	0.81
	Even if I face any problem with my preferred political brand, I will grant this brand a second chance	0.88
	Even if my preferred political brand disappoints me, I would consider this as a sporadic incident	0.72
Inner Self	My party preference symbolizes the kind of person I am inside	0.86
	My party preference reflects my personality	0.92
	My party preference is an extension of my inner self	0.76
Social Self	My party preference contributes to my image	0.91
	My party preference adds to a social 'role' I play	0.94
	My party preference has a positive impact on what others think of me	0.82

the Bartlett test of sphericity and the KMO value (range of 0.62 to 0.78) established the suitability of proceeding with the data analysis with the present data without dropping any items.

To scrutinize the possible presence of the Common Method Variance (CMV) (Eichhorn 2014), we have followed the Common Latent Factor (CLF) approach. The common factor path coefficient to the indicators was 0.461 with a significant t-value. The CMV, which is the square of this value, turns out to be 0.212. Thus, we argued the absence of any significant common method bias in our data (calculated variance was  $21.2\% < 50\%$  of the threshold level). Additionally, the model confirmed convergent validity as the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs exceeded 0.50 threshold level and composite reliability (CR) of each construct was  $> 0.80$ . The test also established discriminant validity as all constructs had an AVE of at least 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker 1981). In the next stage, the AVE values established discriminant validity. The condition to do so was to examine whether the AVE's square root surpassed the correlation between every pair of constructs (Hulland 1999). The outcome was within the acceptable limit, and the model demonstrated discriminant validity (Table 3).

The EFA result showed that apart from political brand love and political brand trust constructs, the other three constructs were uni-dimensional. For the political brand love construct, the result indicated a clear five-component structure. Those components were pleasure, connectedness, memories, idealization, and long-term relationships. Similarly, the political brand trust factor had three components. Those were sincere, competent, and committed. In this study, SEM was used for estimating the model as recommended for the detection of theoretically established indirect effect (Capaldi et al. 1996; Holmbeck 1997).

## 8 Result

### 8.1 Measurement model

To validate the causal structure of the proposed theoretical model, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to estimate the model (Table 4). Since the multivariate kurtosis value is around 7 (7.05), the data does not show a significant departure from normality (Bryne, 2010). The measurement model approach we

**Table 3** Correlation and discriminant validity

	Mean	SD					
Political brand love	3.58	.650	<b>0.809</b>				
Political brand trust	4.14	.862	.214**	<b>0.803</b>			
Social self	3.69	1.33	.169**	.272**	<b>0.893</b>		
Inner self	4.19	1.39	.060	.353**	.347**	<b>0.850</b>	
Political brand preference	5.00	.879	.176**	.321**	.161**	.194**	<b>0.756</b>

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)



**Table 4** Result of confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis				Estimate	
Covariances		Correlations		Initial model	Final model
PBT	<->	PBL	.309	.126**	.100*
PBL	<->	PBP	.290	.109**	.105**
PBT	<->	PBP	.462	.389**	.396**
PBL	<->	SS	.219	.124*	.118*
PBL	<->	IS	.085	.050	.029
PBT	<->	IS	.478	.634**	.642**
PBT	<->	SS	.370	.472**	.475**
PBP	<->	IS	.193	.234**	.234**
PBP	<->	SS	.161	.187**	.187**
SS	<->	IS	.347	.637**	.637**
Diagnostics					
Measures	Initial model		Final model		
CMIN/DF	5.761		3.002		
CFI	0.754		0.905		
RMSEA	0.105		0.068		

*PBT* brand trust, *PBL* brand love, *IS* inner self, *SS* social self, *PBP* brand preference

\*Significance at 5% level

\*\*Significance at 1% level

have taken is reflective, which is more common in psychological and management sciences (Coltman et al. 2008). In this case, the exogenous change in the latent construct can be traced back to the indicators. The initial overall fit CMIN/DF was 5.761, which was not satisfactory. The RMSEA of the estimated model was 0.105 (> 0.10, as recommended by Browne & Cudeck 1993). The CFI was 0.754 (< 0.90, as recommended by Bentler 1992). Other indices values were TLI (.635), NFI (.724), GFI (0.921), RFI (0.590), PCLOSE (0.000), AIC (271.173), and MECVI (.627). The study obtained a better fitting model through re-specification with CMIN/DF 3.002, RMSEA of 0.068, and CFI of 0.905. Other indices values were TLI (.847), NFI (.868), GFI (0.961), RFI (0.786), PCLOSE (0.026), AIC (166.052), and MECVI (.386). The majority of the constructs were found to significantly covary with each other except for political brand love and inner self. The proposed theory hypothesized a positive relationship between all the constructs. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) showed that all the correlations were positive. This showed that the model passed the nomological validity test (Marcus & Forsyth 2008). For Model selection, we had used BIC. The model was selected based on the BIC value (296.536), which was lower for the proposed model (Default) than that of the Saturated (401.124) and the Independence Model (839.165). Accordingly, in the next stage, we estimated the structural model.

## 8.2 Structural model

In this research, we propose to study the mediation effects of the inner self (IS) and social self (SS) while estimating the relationship between political brand love (PBL) and political brand preference (PBP) and political brand trust (PBT) and PBP. Additionally, we also look at the relationship between PBL and PBT. Since we used reflective indicators, the appropriate modeling approach was covariance-based. We used the covariance matrix as an input to the SEM. Our approach was strictly theory-driven, and the analysis of data was confirmatory. The model was estimated in three steps.

In step 1, we estimated the model without the mediators (Table 5). All the path coefficients were statistically significant at 1% level. Specifically, the path coefficient of PBL to PBP was 0.323, PBT to PBP was 0.378, and finally, PBL to PBT was 0.482. CMIN/DF and CFI, and RMSEA values were 3.138, 0.917, and 0.070, respectively, and indicated a good model fit. Other indices values were TLI (.857), NFI (.885), GFI (0.967), RFI (0.804), PCLOSE (0.039), AIC (113.897), and MECVI (0.264). Hoelter's value was higher than 200 (216) in our estimated model (Hoelter 1983). The BIC value (211.760) was lower for the proposed model (Default) than that of the Saturated (273.494) and the Independence Model (630.007).

In step 2, the study estimated the model with the mediators. Six path coefficients were statistically significant. The path coefficient of PBL to PBP was 0.341, PBT to PBP was 0.393, and PBL to PBT was 0.5. In terms of the relation with mediators, the coefficient of PBT to IS was found to be 0.697, PBT to SS was 0.440, and PBL to SS was 0.388. CMIN/DF, CFI, and RMSEA values were 3.042, 0.906, and 0.069, respectively, and confirmed a good model fit. Other indices values were TLI (.843), NFI (.870), GFI (0.961), RFI (0.783), PCLOSE (0.023), AIC (166.402), and MECVI (.387). Hoelter's value was higher than 200 (206). The BIC value (300.964) was lower for the proposed model (Default) than that of the Saturated (401.124) and the Independence Model (839.165). All the diagnostics pointed towards the good fit of the data to the proposed model. Thus the results confirmed that the suggested model satisfactorily fitted the sample data. Since the path coefficients from PBL to PBP and PBT to PBP were still significant full mediation was ruled out. Hence, we performed the third step (Fig. 2).

In step 3, the indirect effects were verified for partial mediation analysis (Preacher & Hayes 2008). We followed bootstrapping estimation technique derived from 10,000 bootstrap samples to address the non-normality issue of the total indirect effect in the multiple-mediation analysis and bootstrapped the indirect effects of PBL and PBT on PBP. To infer the significance of the effects, the 90% bias-corrected confidence intervals were estimated. Results showed statistically significant results of the total effects and direct effects of PBL and PBT on PBP. Further, the indirect effect of PBL on PBP turned out to be statistically significant, whereas that of PBT on PBP was not. The result further revealed that the indirect effect of PBL on PBP was statistically significant through SS and IS (Table 5).

**Table 5** Result of direct and indirect effects

Stage 1: SEM without mediators			Stage 2: SEM with mediators			Stage 3: Bootstrap Results to test for partial mediation			
Paths	Path coefficients	Diagnostics	Paths	Path coefficients	Diagnostics	Total effects	Bias corrected percentile method (90%)	LB	UB
PBT < --- PBL	0.482**	CMIN/DF = 3.138	PBT < --- PBL	0.500**	CMIN/DF = 3.042	PBP < --- PBT	0.288	0.288	0.478
PBP < --- PBT	0.378**	CFI = 0.917	PBP < --- PBT	0.393**	CFI = 0.906	PBP < --- PBL	0.307	0.307	0.852
PBP < --- PBL	0.323**	RMSEA = 0.070	PBP < --- PBL	0.341**	RMSEA = 0.069	Direct Effect	LB	LB	UB
		HOELTER 0.05 = 2.16	IS < --- PBT	0.697**	HOELTER 0.05 = 2.06	PBP < --- PBT	0.285	0.285	0.533
		HOELTER 0.01 = 2.58	SS < --- PBT	0.440**	HOELTER 0.01 = 2.38	PBP < --- PBL	0.137	0.137	0.651
			IS < --- PBL	-0.186		Indirect Effect	LB	LB	UB
			SS < --- PBL	0.388*		PBP < --- PBT	-0.072	-0.072	0.028
			PBP < --- IS	-0.012		PBP < --- PBL	0.056	0.056	0.361
			PBP < --- SS	-0.017		SS	0.072	0.072	0.440
						IS	0.104	0.104	0.703

PBT brand trust, PBL brand love, IS inner self, SS social self, PBP brand preference

\*Significance at 5% level

\*\*Significance at 1% level

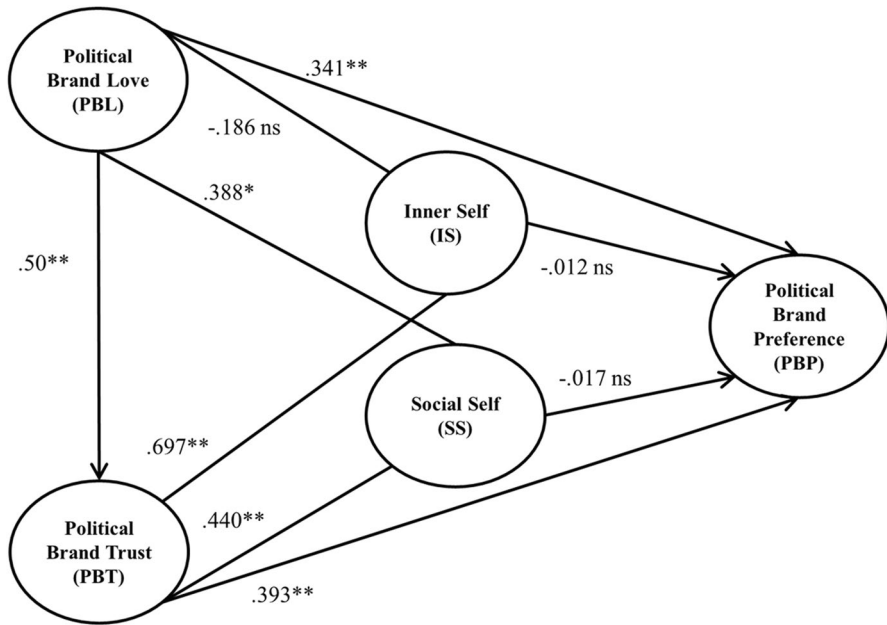


Fig. 2 Full SEM model with mediators

### 8.3 Multigroup invariance for male and female respondents

A multi-group invariance analysis was performed to test whether the results significantly vary between male and female respondents. All possible combinations were tested. The differences with the configural model were then computed for the  $X^2$  statistic, its degrees of freedom, and the difference in the CFI was also estimated. According to Byrne (2010), the model is invariant across factors (here male and female) considered if the  $\Delta X^2$  is statistically significant. It can be seen from the table below; this is indeed the case for our model. Further, Cheung and Rensvold (2002) stated that a better measure of invariance is the  $\Delta CFI < 0.01$ . The table presents the value of this statistic in the last column. All the values are less than 0.01. Hence our model is less affected by the imbalance in the sample across genders (Table 6). This is in line with Banerjee and Ray Chaudhuri's (2018) findings, which advocate that among the demographic determinants, gender, marital status, and income of the respondents do not influence the choice of a political party.

## 9 Discussion

The result as a whole shows that PBL has a significant positive impact on PBP. In the case of party brand love, all the effects are statistically significant. A higher degree of love for the party increases party preference directly ( $H1$ ) and indirectly through IS and SS ( $H4$  and  $H5$ ). It implies that higher fit is inner-self and social-self

**Table 6** Summary of goodness of fit statistics for tests of multigroup invariance

Model	$\chi^2$	DF	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta$ DF	P value	CFI	$\Delta$ CFI
Unconstrained	127.37	66	–	–	–	0.916	–
Measurement weights	140.175	78	12.805	12	0.000	0.915	0.001
Structural weights	145.635	81	5.46	3	0.000	0.911	0.005
Structural covariances	147.018	82	1.383	1	0.000	0.911	0.005
Structural residuals	147.467	83	0.449	1	0.000	0.911	0.005
Measurement residuals	160.745	94	13.278	11	0.000	0.908	0.008

to a particular political party; it enhances the impact of party brand love on party preference. Love for a political party originates from a party's ability to enhance voters' inner and social self. The result supports the findings of Malär et al. (2011) and Ahuvia (2005), which propagate that consumers prefer brands that define their identities. This supports the view of Banerjee and Goel (2020), who advocate that given the life stage in which young voters belong, they form their opinion about a party based on the reflection of their symbolic identity. Brand love emerges when consumers' identity fits products/brands.

Brand love subconsciously relates to one's subjective preferences and socially acceptable choices to positively influence political parties' attitudes. Our study shows that the absorption of a party brand into a voter's sense of self-identity is required to develop brand love. Voters guided by their hearts while forming their political preferences may be guided more by inner and social self. Young voters qualify in this category. Because of their young age, they form their opinion based on the reflection of their inner self and how society would judge them once their political preference is revealed. It may also be influenced by their aspirations related to job prospects, which give them instant social recognition in an emerging market economy like India. Hence party promising jobs can instantly spur love. It would then be accentuated due to inner desires and social recognition being fulfilled, converting it into a positive attitude towards such a party.

The study further advocates that higher PBT leads to higher PBP both directly and when both direct (*H2*) and indirect effects are considered whole. The result is in line with Bauer (1996), who advocates that brand trust is essential to guarantee brand preference. Brand trust helps consumers to handle consumption anxiety and makes people feel comfortable (Grabner-Kraeuter 2002). On the other hand, there is no statistically significant indirect effect of party brand trust on party preference through IS or SS (*H6 and H7*). It shows that higher trust influences party choice irrespective of natural or socially acceptable choices.

One may argue that the voter's trust is much more concrete and grounded. Voter's judgment of a party's trustworthiness and willingness to trust the party is most likely formed after scrutiny of party activities. Once formed, it is difficult to change. Temporary deviation from the proclaimed path may not change the attitude of voters towards the party. Voters having higher trust do not depend on the inner self or social self to form opinions about the party. While forming a trust, inner and socially

desirable traits might guide political choice but are not influenced by them once formed. The study area is an example of a state with a very high level of stickiness regarding attitude about political parties. A Left Coalitional government ruled the state for thirty-four years. The change occurred only when socially disruptive policies impacted its vote bank severely. The trust built over many years dwindled due to wrong policies and due to new voters failing to identify with the incumbent party.

The result further advocates that PBL has a significant positive impact on PBT in the political market (*H3*). The result agrees with Regan et al.'s (1998) conclusions, which view that love is an antecedent of having trust in a brand. Voters who develop feelings of love for a political party trust the party more. Satisfied voters who also love the party brand are expected to be more confident about their relationship with the party, and they consider the party to be reliable and trustworthy. Party brand love can reinforce the trust and interest in continuing the relationship with the party for a longer tenure.

## 10 Theoretical contributions

The objective of this research was to examine the influence of brand love on party brand preference of young voters. To the best of our knowledge, this may be the first study investigating the concept of brand love in the political market. By examining the impact of political brand love on party preference, this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between brand love and other relational constructs like brand trust, social self, and inner self on party preference. The current study makes the following contributions. *First*, the study views that voters' love for political parties influences their party preference. Thus, love as an interpersonal factor plays a significant role in the political market. It implies that the more the voters develop a love for a political party, the more natural it would be for politicians to convert their votes in favor of their party. During the communication noise created by rival parties, focusing on developing voters' love for the party can be advantageous for political marketers for enhanced voter acceptance. *Second*, the result advocates that to ensure the growing trust of voters, political marketers should take appropriate steps to enhance voters' love for the party. *Third*, the result indicates that voters' attitudes towards political parties become more positive if brand love reinforces voters' inner and social self. *Fourth*, brand trust, on the other hand, influences attitude towards political parties positively irrespective of the inner traits or social traits of the voters. *Fifth*, there is a strong probability that voters with higher trust in a political party will cast their vote in favor of the party.

## 11 Managerial implications

A political party that invests in building party brand love may reap benefits in the long run in voters' active political support and willingness to cast votes in favor of the party. Political parties should try to find ways to increase love for them in the mind of the voters. Political marketers may focus on their campaigns, manifesto,

debate, and discussions, voters connect programs through interaction and respond to their queries, social media engagement to inculcate love quotient inside political brands. The same may help shape voters' trust and voting preference. Political campaigns and social media communications may focus on youth-centric issues like the promise of jobs, governance, and economic development to mobilize political participation. Political parties may also leverage the charisma of political leaders to increase voters' love for them. The election manifesto should talk about promises and schemes to meet young voters' expectations from the party. The interesting point to note is that the promises made by parties should be honored. It is required to build trust. Love for the brand may be severely jolted if the party fails on its promises. Trust would never be built, and it would become difficult for the party to retain loyal voters. Through careful political processes and campaign design, one may generate love for the party, but that may not generate positive outcomes if promises are not kept.

The study further reveals that brand love, in conjunction with inner self and social self, may create a positive party image in voters' minds. A voter continues to love the party if there is identity congruence between the party and the voter. In the presence of the same, a political party may engage and convince voters in its favor. Thus, the task for the political parties may be to identify these inner and social traits of the voters and develop political processes and campaigns to showcase policies in sync with them. The same will create a positive attitude towards the party if the voter is already emotionally connected. However, if it fails to create trust, then sustaining party preference in the long term may become difficult. Building trust requires time, and political parties should try to reap the benefits that may accrue from young voters. Voters' intense love for the party may help to develop trust provided the promises are kept.

## 12 Research limitations and future implications

This research examines the influence of political brand love on voters' preferences for the political party. The findings are based on a study conducted among young Indian voters. As the data is collected from Kolkata, India, the results may face generalization issues. To test the general applicability of the same, this research may be repeated in other emerging markets. The present study is a cross-sectional one based on data collected at a particular point in time. In the future, longitudinal study design may better capture the changes in voters' views about proposed relationships over some timeframe. Significantly, whether a party honoring its commitments enhances voters' trust can be captured better in a longitudinal setting.

This empirical research captured the views of young respondents. The study may be repeated across age groups to understand the impact of brand love on different demographic constituents. A broader sample may allow researchers to understand differences among different segments. Specifically, the study may explore view of older adults in this context as older adults would have stronger brand love and therefore stronger brand preference and their voting rate is also high in comparison to their younger counterparts. The current study sample has a substantial male young

adult bias. Hence, the relationships proposed here among constructs can also be revalidated for the women voters. Future research could examine the proposed relationships and use moderators such as gender and age. To gather a comprehensive understanding, a future study may examine the views of political experts. Political experts may share their analytical viewpoints about political brand love, which may be compared with voters' viewpoints to concretise the theories proposed.

### 13 Conclusion

The current study provides valuable insights for political marketers. The summary of the findings are presented in Fig. 3 as a ready reckoner for political marketers. The insights revealed from the study may improve political marketers' understanding of voters' mindset. We may conclude that in recent times of global turbulence, democracies in many countries have been tested for their resilience, and there is a need to focus on the determinants of political brand preference. Intense competition between the political parties is the norm of the day. In this era of social media and costless communication it is difficult for parties to draw voters towards their ideology given the easy access of rivals to the same electorate. Hence it is important to go beyond the traditional methods of voter-connect and try to go a step further. By recognising the individual voters' touch points which reflect their inner and social self the political parties can help develop love for their brands. This helps the parties to make voters look beyond their shellfish wants and embrace party ideologies. Additionally, trust is also developed from love but here the fulfilling of stated promises is important to convert this feeling into votes. Trust has been found to be directly impacting political preference irrespective of an individual's social or inner

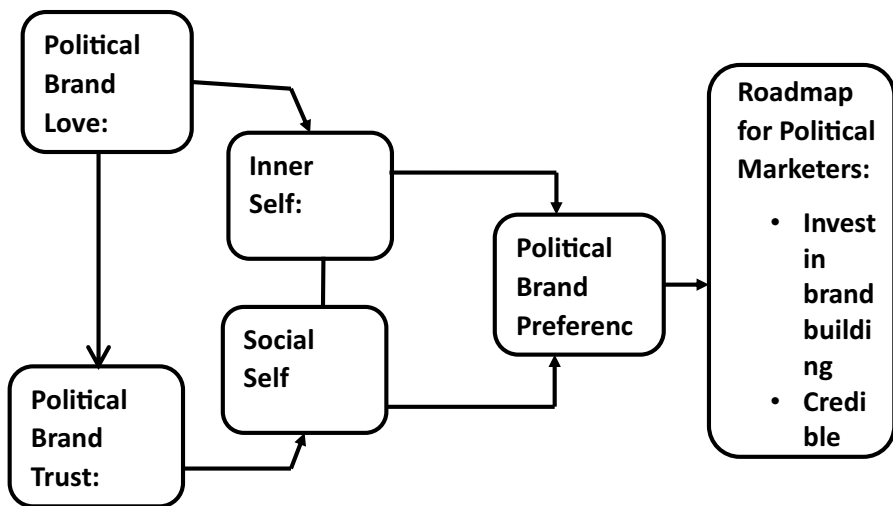


Fig. 3 A summary view of study findings



self. As discussed earlier enhancing trust can make it easier for political parties to generate positive feelings towards their brand.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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