



Determinants of voting behaviour: Interrogating the relevance of elections in a democracy

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Abstract

Elections are often cited as one of the essential conditions of having a successful democracy. However, what is required is to understand, mere conduct of elections is not a sufficient bases of claiming the functioning of a democracy. Instead, we need to evaluate, the manner, in which elections has been performed, the turnout of voters has emerged, the kind of voters have participated along with factors which have determined their voting behaviour and choice, for assessing the functioning of a democracy. Nonetheless, when determinants of voting behaviour are those which causes splits in the society and weaken the political system such as caste, gender, religion, muscle power, money power, among numerous other variables, it results in defeat of not only the purpose of democracy but also in the denial of achieving the constitutional ideals of liberty, equality, rights, and, justice for each and every citizen. Therefore, this paper seeks to critically examine the factors which impact the voting behaviours, consequently undermining the exercise and relevance of elections in a democracy.

Keywords: voting, elections, politics, democracy, discrimination, social system, voter

Introduction

Section 1: Understanding the Meaning and Relevance of Election in a Democracy

Election in a general sense can be interpreted as an act of selection or choosing. In other words, elections signify the exercise of choice. A choice by citizens of the country. In a democracy it is the choice of citizen which lies at the heart of functioning of a political system. It provides citizens an entitlement to choose who will be their representative, to decide which party or leader will be the governing authority. In other words, elections entail the participation and engagement of citizen in making or breaking of their political system. Elections on the one hand is a significant platform through which citizens expresses their political opinion (political choices of voters), on the other hand, provides a way through which political power (of governing authorities) can be shifted from one party to another based on the will of the citizens. In this way, elections are pivotal base of a democratic political system.

Elections is not only a right given to the voters to select the candidate or party of their choice, it is a responsibility, a duty to ensure the command of the nation's political system vested in right hands. Now this 'right hand' is the most debating question because it is highly undecidable aspect of picking who is right since for each voter their choice is right. And it is this ability to make difference in 'choosing right candidate/party' or 'choosing their own choice as right' is required to make elections serve their purpose in a democracy.

Elections though entail political equality, by making claim that irrespective of any biases, citizens who have qualified an age criterion is entitled to participate as a voter in the political system. But problem emerges when we limit this equality only to giving permission to vote. To put it in other way, only superficially politically recognising people as equal and not embracing this equality in a genuine sense. It is this superficial sense of acknowledging that all citizens of age 18 years have right to vote, but do not let them exercise choice of deciding whom to vote. Consequently, when this choice is curbed, manipulated, limited, or moulded, it negatively impacts the purpose of selection that is election in a democracy.

Though in a democracy we believe to have a representative government, but it in actual much depends upon how the system operates itself. Therefore, the functioning aspect, in substantive sense, how a particular political system works, its internal functioning, impacts the conclusion of whether we are having a representative political system or the representation of splits in the social and political system.

Elections are the medium through which twin goals of representation and accountability are expressed in the political system. When elections are conducted in free (without any imposition, force, manipulation) and fair (genuine exercise of choice by voters) manner then it does entails representative system which simultaneously put the obligation of accountability on the elected representatives.

Moreover, we can say elections could be an educative process, which can inculcate political awareness, political education even to an illiterate of existing political system or even hint of how their political system operates by just getting to know the way elections are being conducted. Simultaneously, provides an opportunity to the

literate of not only to intensify their existing information about the political system, but also to exercise their duty to vote in a successful and genuine manner.

Therefore, elections are the medium of enriching functioning of a democratic system. Consequently, to ensure elections are conducted in impartial, and biasfree manner is a pivotal requirement for serving the purpose of democratic representative government. Hence, the elections should be operated in a manner where citizens can exercise their choice of political selection without any threat, insecurity, suspicion, fear, and favour.

Section 2: Meaning and Relevance of Voting in a Democracy

According to Abraham Lincoln, ‘the ballot is stronger than the bullet,’ (Johri & Gupta, 92) meaning, a change which a vote by a single voter can bring can never be achieved by the violent extremists or radical ways, the way a choice can be expressed and exercised by a vote it can never be accomplished at the gun point or by threat. While according to Lyndon B. Johnson, ‘A man without vote is man without protection’, (Johri & Gupta, 92) this definition itself says how a vote can act as a protective shield to the voter, it can secure political rights, equality, justice, liberty, entitlements, which cannot be secured so easily by any other means. The one who has the right to choose the political system and make choice of who will govern and how, is the one who is abled and enabled to protect and secure his/her liberties. This way, it reflects the one who cannot choose or participate in the political process is no way secured and empowered and always at the edge of being exploited. Similarly, according to Arlen Specter, ‘voting is fundamental in our democracy. It has yielded enormous results’ (Johri & Gupta, 92). It is an admitted fact we cannot have a democracy without the right to vote. Democracy is all about creating a citizen centric government, the one which places choice and consent of its citizen above any narrow interest. We cannot hope to get a democracy in the absence of a practice of genuine voting. All these definitions reflect the essence of voting in a democracy. The role an act of voting plays or could play in a democratic system has been clearly manifested by these definitions.

Voting is a medium through which citizens can express their political choices, whether it is of governing pattern or of leaders and parties. It is a mechanism through which all citizens irrespective of any differences or discriminations can be brought together on a single platform, a stage where they all are perceived equal by the state and inculcates a sense of equality and right in all citizens. It is a process through which minority or majority, no matter what so gender, religion, class, or any other factor differences, everyone gets a right to vote and each vote gets the same value. All the citizens get collected at their allocated booth irrespective of any biased differences of caste or community, they get assembled under one roof, and each gets the chance of voting at the same EVM machine. In other words, it is a true example of serving equality at least in a political stage of a democratic framework.

Voting is a mechanism through which citizens expresses their ‘approval or disapproval of governmental decision, policies, programmes of various political parties, candidates’, (Johri & Gupta, 91). This power of approval or disapproval is empowering and a source of emancipation for citizens, since though they are being governed but they are the one who is approving or disapproving the questions of who, why, and how. However, this voting does not take place in a vacuum, neither it is unaffected by the existing biases, manipulations, discriminations, or differences, existing either at political, social, economic or cultural level. The factors such as political socialization, toleration of diversity of political ideologies, views, attitudes, beliefs, political culture, political traditions, (Johri & Gupta 91) social location of voters, among other numerous determinants plays a crucial role in affecting the voting behaviour of citizens.

As Plano and Riggs said, ‘voting behaviour is a field of study concerned with the ways in which people tend to vote in public election and reason why they vote as they do’ (Johri & Gupta 92). In other words, the reason why, how, whom, is voted by voters has become a matter of crucial analyses. It calls for interrogation of the political behaviour for understanding the process of voting in elections. ‘The study of electoral behaviour constitutes a very significant area of empirical investigation’ (Johri & Gupta 93). To put it in other way, it is by examining the electoral behaviour, one can understand the relevance of conducting elections, can interpret the outcomes of elections, can articulate what discourages or encourages a voter to vote. This calls for interpreting voting behaviour as ‘means which elements and circumstances influences a voter while making use of his vote’ (Johri & Gupta 93).

Richard Rose and Harvey Massavir states six functions which voting covers:

1. It involves individual choice of governors or major governmental policies.
2. It permits individual to participate in a reciprocal and continuing exchange of influence with officeholders and candidates.
3. It contributes to development or maintenance of an individual’s allegiance to the existing constitutional regime.
4. It contributes in development or maintenance of voter’s disaffection from existing constitutional regime.
5. It has emotional significance for the voter.
6. The study of voting behaviour has come to be regarded as an important aspect of contemporary political research and theory. (Johri & Gupta 94)

Therefore, when it comes to successful functioning of a democracy, what is required is not just an act of voting, instead it call for rational genuine consent-based voting. But when it comes to real life circumstance, we see may people do not vote, because either they undermine the relevance of voting assuming it has nothing to do with

them, thereby interpreting as if voting is not at all going to serve their purpose, basically political ignorance, corruption, abuse of power, and lack of political education demotivates them or they are too busy in dealing with everyday life challenges, they just didn't get connected with the political system. Apart from this, whether voter votes irrationally, or do not vote, in either case, it the purpose of democracy and relevance of voting which gets undermine.

What is required is to inculcate the sense of taking voting not only as a right, instead understanding its importance as a duty, with an obligation of fulfilling it with required consciousness, effective participation, and honest expression of their will. In other words, giving a participation, which is genuine, based on rational analyses of parties and candidates. When we say of accomplishing democracy, it has to be understood, voter plays an equally contributing role as much as an effective political party or candidate plays. When we say political parties needs to be effective in terms of serving purpose of democracy, it also implies role of voter to choose ignoring the influences or factors which manipulates their decisions. Until and unless we have a voter who votes for selecting the governing authorities for running the political system in a desired and required manner, we cannot hope to achieve democracy. Because right now what we have is, voters voting under manipulation, for short term gains, for personal biases and affiliations, under threat voting, not voting at all, or doing irrational random voting, in either case they are after one or the other purpose and undermining the duty and obligation they have towards their political system, and nation state.

Hence, when voter will be using election as a mechanism for expressing their political choices of governing patterns and authorities, then they will be able to bring about a change, which will provide the adequate representation to the interest of people, enhance the relevance of election, upheld the significance of voting, upscale the voters participation and awareness, serve the purpose of democracy, and hence bring the required political changes. Thereby, actually exercising voting as a power which has been entrusted to citizens by the democratic system. It will be bringing equilibrium in maintaining the power balance between the governing authorities and governed. It will entail accountability, responsibility, from the governing authorities, simultaneously bring the transparency in the political system.

Section 3: Determinants of Voting Behaviour

According to Johri and Gupta, 'the proportion of persons taking part in voting keeps changing according to their demographic traits and socio-economic standard' (Johri & Gupta 94). In other words, we do not have or claim to have one single factor determining the voting behaviour, since behaviour of human is not static, instead it is dynamic which keeps on getting influenced and modified as per their prevailing circumstances.

Some of the determinants affecting voting behaviour are as follows:

1. **Literacy:** the literacy level of the people of that particular place where voting has to take place, plays a pivotal role in affecting the outcome of voting. Literacy here means, the knowledge of political system, purpose of voting, or its relevance in a democratic system.
2. **Illiteracy:** now like literacy, the level of illiteracy also plays a significant role. If voters are uneducated, they can be easily moulded and manipulated to fulfil political agendas by converting them in to vote banks.
3. **Leader's personality:** it is an undeniable fact; personality of leaders plays a significant role in attracting the voters. Often it is the impact of leader which motivates people to vote for a particular party.
4. **Casteism:** caste is an evil which has deep rooted presence in Indian society. It plays a unique part in impacting the voting preferences and choices at the time of election. As often the tendency has been to vote for the one belonging to our caste group. Consequently, parties also use caste as a factor to not only divide the people but to also assure voting gets done in their favour.
5. **Class:** each class has their own challenges and requirements and it is this economic segregation which makes preferences of parties based on the kind of class one belongs to. Simultaneously, we too have such parties which makes goals catering to one or the other particular class, sometimes passively as a move of uplifting the interest of a class and sometimes as a group which will be taking radical action to serve the interest of that group.
6. **Gender:** it is one of the crucial elements when it comes to being equal even if in political sphere. Women are often not permitted to go specially for voting even if they have the same right, or asked to give the vote to the person whom family especially male members are deciding to give. Further, it is also not a new thing that women themselves are often unaware of whom to vote or else even if they are well informed, they are curbed from exercising their political choices.
7. **Women voters:** it has been a new tendency to make women friendly slogans, claims of providing gender equality, having women wing, giving seats to women, to capture the votes of women and of the groups and associations which work in favour of upliftment of women. Often this gesture is used to manipulate the public political opinion in party's favour.

8. **Religion:** after caste one of the dividing and uniting factor among human civilization is itself religion. Often religious insecurities, rivalries, goals, claims, have been used as a method of capturing vote. Religion is a sensitive matter especially if we are seeing it in Indian context, where politics is ridden with religious influences, it does affect the voters' choices and decisions.
9. **Language:** it is a barrier as well as a bridge for building a vote bank. Often linguistic biases are used to convince the familiarity and closeness to a community. It is often used to get votes by provoking people against each other on linguistic basis. By inculcating in people that their interest is far more secured with the group with which they have some common connective basis.
10. **Opinion polls:** often such polls are conducted before elections to get a sense of prevailing political wave and has its own beneficial reasons. But sometimes declaration of results of polls just before election, does impacts the voters' choices, and hampers his/her political preferences.
11. **Money power:** there are number of people who are living below poverty line or under economically challenging situations, for them meeting basic needs is a real priority, thinking about political system is not part of their feasible situation, it is this situation which becomes the reason of buying people's vote. Voters due to bad economic situations, looks for short term gains and do not opt for long term benefits of having a right political system.
12. **Muscle power:** threatening, forcing, pressuring voters to vote or not to vote in favour of a party has always been a part and parcel of evil practices impacting political system and this has been continuing to impact the voters' political choices and preferences.
13. **Political socialisation:** our internalisation and inculcation of political values, beliefs, assumptions, given by family, society, peer groups, etc does impact our political opinion consequently our political voting behaviour.
14. **Ideology:** here both the ideology of party and of the voters plays a crucial role in impacting voting behaviour. Either voters have already chosen or inculcated ideology or else the party uses his influences to make voters follow their ideology, anyhow, it does accumulate and end up in the form of vote bank for the party.
15. **Performance of party in power:** while newly competing parties try to convince their competency, earlier existing parties have their past performance as a base of their selection or rejection and does act as a rationale for voters to decides whether they can be given next chance or not.
16. **Election campaigns:** ability to reach through all masses is a confidence building measure and does act as a milestone in assuring one's success in election. And when it comes to campaigning parties does use all possible ways of impacting but what counts is who has been able to get the nerve of the voters.
17. **Media:** print or electronic both plays pivotal role in shaping the mindset of a voters. Either through consistently reading about in favour or against a party or watching the same via electronic media. And when we do have paid news with the realisation that we do not have media with freedom of writing or showing what is truth, since they too operate under political pressure, it does hamper the voting behaviour.
18. **Populist slogans:** they are direct invaders of the mind of a voter. They have been used when parties cannot provide rationale of why they should be chosen, instead went for ways which does not gives voters a chance of thinking what is correct. It is a manipulative measure to convince the voters that their growth and development goes with the party competing.
19. **Rise in number of political parties:** though we say, now we have number of choices but at the same it does split the votes of a voters among numerous parties which does hampers the desired outcome of voting.
20. **NOTA:** it has always been an ignored category, instead of that it should be seriously undertaken for analyses. It is chosen when people either do not have their political choice or when there is actually no competent candidate/party. In either case it does calls for acknowledging the relevance of a vote given by voters especially when we are referring it in the context of NOTA, for critically analysing the relevance of voting behaviour in a democracy.

Section 4: Role of election and voting in a democracy a conclusive note

When it comes to analysing the role of election and voting in a democracy, it becomes essential to realise mere conduct of elections and voting for the sake of voting or not voting at all does not make a political system

democratic. What here calls for is analysing the deep-rooted causes which does leads to the failures of performing election or giving vote.

First what is essential is to understand, political structure does not operate in a vacuum. A political system operates in a dialogic form, it is a two-way process, which calls for equal participation and engagement of both the parties/leaders that is political system and citizens the voters from the social system.

Often, we easily put the blame of not functioning of democracy on politicians or urge the need of reforming political system by giving various reformative measures which to some extents have played a crucial role in bringing required changes but still lacunas persist. Here what we have to understand is the interdependence of social and political system.

Now, political system is run by individuals who are of course citizens of the country, to whom we put blames of corrupting and damaging political system, but they have been brought to the political system from none other than social system. Citizens from the social sphere are electing other citizens to operate and regulate the function of political system. And this is the catch we have to get the grip. Reform is required at the social system first which can automatically bring integrity at the political system.

One does not get corrupt by being in political system or get religious or caste biased after getting power. These biases are inculcated, socialised in citizens at the societal level which shapes their mindset, approach, perception, insecurity, or belief system. Therefore, till the time social sphere is, or will remain corrupted, full of biases, discriminations, these tendencies will continue to carry forward through the same social system biased citizens to the political system.

Moreover, even at social system citizens do not perceive each other as citizens, they see each other through various lens of diversity such as religion, caste, gender, region, etc, which exist in the society. The existing diversity is being trying to made possible by encouraging toleration, however, this toleration aspect lacks the value of acceptance. In other words, we let citizens identify people as 'others' who co-exists but do not accept them as part of our structure. Thereby, spreading the notions of insecurity, fear, suspicions, threat whether it is of minority from majority or of caste or gender.

This insecurity led voters to figure out way of accomplishing security which gets bifurcated in two ways; one as a voter to select the one to whom one can relate or identify or else competing for capturing political power to secure their belonging group a sense of security, in either case, citizens insecurities manifest way of achieving security through political space, which instead of being a platform of security interest of all, becomes the space of playing one's narrow politics and biases.

Hence, if one has to upheld the required relevance of voting and election, and make democracy a success, first, we have to tackle the difference at social sphere. Democracy requires people's trust that existing political system and authorities will be representative of all irrespective of any biases or affiliations. And that confidence can only be built when we understand the value of a political system. We have to create awareness that political system is recourse of overcoming societal discriminations and insecurities and not a way of enhancing the societal differences which can lead to splits in society by abuse of political power.

In other words, political power is a responsibility to serve all, it withholds accountability towards all those citizens which are existing in a nation state. It is not an opportunity of taking revenge or bringing splits or serving one's belonging or uprooting any existing group of citizens. Consequently, election is to manifest how party/leader is right for serving by providing rational justifications, scope of work they can do, along with their approach which can upheld interest of all. And not a medium of creating vote banks by manipulating people on sensitive issues such as religion, region or caste.

Similarly, voting is not only a right but also a duty and it should be exercised with one's consent, choice, and sense of responsibility and accountability. It should be understood voting under influence, randomly voting, not voting, or using voting to strengthen biased interest, in either case neither valuing it as a right of choosing the kind of political system required or should be for the welfare of all, nor fulfilling one's duty of serving the national interest by choosing right party/leader which can upheld common good by rising above one's narrow benefits.

Hence, till the time party/leader or voters will be after their short-term gains, they won't be able to actualise the long-term benefits which a political system can actually bring by removing all insecurities, threat, fear or suspiciousness which exist at societal system and impacts the political system.

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