

Electoral Politics

In a democracy, people do not govern directly. They govern through the elected-representatives. Governing through elected representatives is the most common form of democracy.

Electoral politics is all about understanding election of representatives, need of elections and how to make election democratic. It also involves examining the role of the election commission in ensuring free and fair elections.

Elections

The mechanism or procedure by which people choose their representatives at regular intervals is called election. If people are not satisfied with the working of the government then they can change the government in the next term of elections.

Procedure of Elections

The procedure of election can be understood by the real example of Haryana Assembly elections. It will show how candidates standing in election become representatives and how power can be removed from their hands.

Assembly Election in Haryana

Formation of New Party 'Lok Dal' Haryana had been ruled by Congress party since 1982. At that time, Chaudhary Devi Lai was an opposition leader. He led movement called Nyaya Yudh (struggle for justice) and formed new party 'Lok Dal'.

Election Campaign of Devi Lai In election campaign of 1987 Assembly election, Devi Lai promised voters that if his party win, he would give loans to farmers and small businessmen.

Voters favoured Lok Dal As people were unhappy with the existing government, they were attracted by Devi Lai's promise. They voted in favour of Lok Dal and its partners won 76 out of 90 seats.

Results Announced Lok Dal won 60 seats that's why it had a clear majority in the – Assembly. The party with a clear majority is invited by the governor to form the government. Congress got only 5 seats. As the election result was announced, the existing Chief Minister of Congress resigned.

Devi Lai became Chief Minister The newly elected Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of Lok Dal chose Devi Lai as their leader. The Governor invited' Devi Lai to be the new Chief Minister. After three days of the election result, he took the oath. Then his government issued a government order to give loans to small farmers, agricultural labourers and small businessmen.

Congress again forms Government Lok Dal ruled the state for 4 years. In 1991 election, the party did not win people's support. This time Congress won the election and formed the government.

Need for Elections

Elections are needed to elect representatives. The need of elections can be understood by imagining a democracy without elections.

In the absence of the election, all the people have to sit together every day and take all the decisions. But this is not possible in any large community. Nor it is possible for everyone to have the time and knowledge to take decisions on all matters. Therefore, in most democracies, people rule through their representatives. The elections are needed for any representative democracy because

- They solve the problem of assessing people on the basis of education, knowledge or experience,
- They help in analysing that people like their representatives or not.
- They ensure that the representatives rule as per the wishes of the people and make sure that those who are not working for the people, do not remain their representatives.

In an election, the voters make many choices like

- They can choose who will make laws for them.
- They can choose who will form the government and take major decisions.
- They can choose the party whose policies will guide the government and lawmaking.

What Makes An Election Democratic?

Elections are held in all democratic countries and also in most of the non-democratic countries in many ways. But there is a simple list of the minimum conditions which make an election democratic like

- Everyone should have the right to choose a representative. It means everyone has one vote and every vote has equal value.
- Political parties and candidates should be free to contest elections and offer some real choices to the voters.
- The choices should be offered at regular intervals. For that elections must be held regularly after a certain period.
- The candidates preferred by the people only should get elected.
- Elections are conducted in a free and fair manner where people choose those representatives whom they really wish.

Political Competition

Elections are all about competition. Without competition, elections would become meaningless. Political competition takes place when different political parties compete to gain confidence and ultimately the vote of the voters. They make promises and give incentives to motivate the voters.

This electoral competition has many demerits like

- It creates a sense of disunity and factionalism (Groupism) and party-politics in every locality.
- Different political parties and candidates often use dirty tricks like booth capturing to win elections.
- The pressure to win electoral fights does not allow to- form useful long term policies.
- The competition leads to the idea of being dragged into the unhealthy competition. That's why good people do not enter and participate in political competition.

The electoral competition also has some merits like

- Regular electoral competition provides incentives to political parties and leaders. If they can satisfy the voters with their work, they will be able to win again.
- If a political party is motivated only by the desire to be in power, even then it will be forced to serve the people.
- It reveals the real motive of political parties.
- It gives choices to voters to choose among the best.

System Of Elections In India

In India, Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha (Assembly) elections are held regularly every five years. After five years, the term of all the elected representatives comes to an end. Elections are held in all constituencies at the same time, either on the same day or within a few days. This is known as General Election. Sometimes an election is held only for one constituency to fill the vacancy caused by death or resignation of a member. This is known as a by-election.

Electoral Constituencies

In India, an area based system of representation is followed where the country is divided into different areas for purpose of elections. These are called Electoral Constituencies. Every voter who lives in an area elect one representative.

For the Lok Sabha election, India is divided into 543 constituencies. The representative elected from each constituency is called Member of Parliament or an MP. One of the features of a democratic election is that every vote has equal value. For Vidhan Sabha election, each state is divided into a specific number of assembly

constituencies and the elected representative of each assembly constituency is called the Member of Legislative Assembly or an MLA.

By-election: If a representative from a constituency dies while in office or if the office-falls are vacant because of reasons like resignation, fresh elections are held in that particular constituency. Such an election is called a by-election.

Constituency' Voters in a geographical area who elect a representative to the Legislative Bodies.

Each parliamentary constituency has within it several assembly constituencies. The same principle applies for Panchayat and Municipal elections.

Each village or town is divided into different wards that are like constituencies. Each ward elects one member of the village or the urban local body. Sometimes these constituencies are counted as 'seats' and each constituency represents one seat in the assembly.

For example, when we say that 'Lok Dal won 60 seats¹ in Haryana, it means that candidates of Lok Dal won in 60 assembly constituencies in the state and thus Lok Dal had 60 MLAs in the State Assembly.

Reserved Constituencies

The Constitution makers were worried that in an open electoral competition, certain weaker sections may not stand a good chance to get elected to the Lok Sabha and the state Legislative Assemblies.

If that happens, our Parliament and Assemblies would be deprived of the voice of a significant section of our population. That would make our democracy less representative and less democratic.

Reservation for SC and ST

The makers of our Constitution thought of a special system of reserved constituencies for the weaker sections. Some constituencies are reserved for people who belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST).

In an SC reserved constituency, only someone who belongs to the Scheduled Castes can stand for election.

Similarly, only those belonging to the Scheduled Tribes can contest an election from a constituency reserved for ST.

Reservation in Lok Sabha/ District/Local Level

A few seats in Lok Sabha are reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This number is in proportion to their share in the total population.

In the year 2012, 84 seats are reserved for the Scheduled Castes and 47 for the Scheduled Tribes (in Lok Sabha).

Thus, the reserved seats for SC and ST do not take away the legitimate share of any other social group. This system of reservation was extended later to other weaker sections at the district and local level. In many states, seats in rural (panchayat) and urban (municipalities and corporations) local bodies are now reserved for Other

Backward Classes (OBC) as well.

However, the proportion of seats reserved varies from state to state. Similarly, one-third of the seats are reserved in rural and urban local bodies for women candidates.

Voters List

When the constituencies are decided, the next step is to decide who can and who cannot vote. In a democratic election, the list of those who are eligible to vote is prepared much before the election and given to everyone. This list is officially called the Electoral Roll and is commonly known as the Voters' List.

This is an important step as it is linked to the first condition of a democratic election i.e. everyone should get an equal opportunity to choose representatives. All the citizens are human beings with their own needs and views. That is why all of them deserve to have an equal say in decisions that affect them. Therefore everyone is given the right to vote.

The right to vote falls under Universal Adult Franchise. It means all the citizens aged 18 years and above can vote in an election regardless of his or her caste, religion or gender.

Maintaining of Voters' list

It is the responsibility of the government to get the names of all the eligible voters put on the voters' list. As new persons attain voting age, names are added to the voters' list, names of those who move out of a place or those who are dead are deleted. A complete revision of the list takes place every five years. This is done to ensure that it remains up to date.

[Note Some criminals and persons with unsound mind can be denied the right to vote, but only in rare situations.]

Election Photo Identify Card (EPIC)

In the last few years, a new system of Election Photo Identity Card (EPIC) has been introduced. The voters are required to carry this card when they go out to vote so that no one can vote in their place. The card has not been made compulsory for voting, and voters can show many other proofs of identity like the ration card, driving licence or Adhar Card.

Nomination Of Candidates

The system of our country provides almost no restrictions on anyone to contest the election. This only makes any election a democratic election.

Anyone who can be a voter can also become a candidate in elections. The only difference to be a voter is that the minimum age is 18 years while to be a candidate in the election the minimum age is 25 years. There are also some other restrictions on criminals but these apply in very extreme cases.

Political parties nominate their candidates who get the party support and symbol. Party's nomination is often called Party Ticket. The candidate has to fill a nomination form and give some money as a security deposit.

Moreover, every candidate has to make a legal declaration giving full details of

- Educational qualifications of the candidate
- Details of the assets and liabilities of the candidate and his/her family; and
- Serious criminal cases pending against the candidate.

The information provided has to be made public in order to provide an opportunity to the voters to make their decision on the basis of the information provided by the candidates.

Electoral Roll It is the voters' list prepared by a door to door survey to include only bonafide voters and minimise the role of bogus voters. Universal Adult Franchise Every Indian citizen of 18 years and above have the right to vote irrespective of caste, creed and sex.

Educational Qualifications for Candidates

There is no educational qualification for candidates for being an MP or an MLA. However, the relevant qualification for candidates is the ability to understand people's concerns, problems and to represent people's interests.

Putting an educational qualification would go against the spirit of democracy because it would deprive a majority of the citizens right to contest elections. This is because still, the majority of the Indian population is uneducated.

Election Campaign

Election campaign means the promotion (or propaganda) of the policies, offers and promises that the candidates make to voters to fulfill if they are elected. In this way, voters can decide the candidate to vote for. They vote for the candidate whose policies they like.

In our country, election campaigning takes place for a two-week period between the announcement of the final list of candidates and the date of polling.

During this period, the candidates contact their electorate, political leaders, address election meetings and political parties mobilise their supporters. This is also the period when Print Media and television news are full of election-related stories and debates.

The election campaign is not limited to these two weeks only. Political parties start preparing for elections months before they actually take place.

They prepare their election manifestos. In election campaigns, political parties try to focus public attention on some big issues. They want to attract the public to that issue and get them to vote for their party on that basis.

Slogans Given by Different Political Parties

Some of the successful slogans given by different political parties in various elections are given below

- The Congress party led by Indira Gahdhi gave the slogan of 'Garibi Hatao' (Remove poverty) in the Lok Sabha elections of 1971. The party promised to reorient all the policies of the government to remove poverty from the country.
- 'Save Democracy' was the slogan given by Janata Party in the next Lok Sabha election held in 1977. Hie party promised to undo the .excesses committed during Emergency and restore civil liberties.
- The Left Front used the slogan of 'Land to the Teller' in the West Bengal Assembly elections held in 1977.
- 'Protect the Self-Respect of the Telugus' was the slogan used by N.T. Rama Rao, the leader of the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh Assembly elections in 1983.

Code of Conduct and Laws

To regulate the election campaign, there are some election laws. According to these laws, no party or candidate can

- bribe or threaten voters,
- appeal to them in the name of caste or religion,
- use government resources for election campaign and
- spend more than Rs. 25 lakh in a constituency for a Lok Sabha election or Rs. 10 lakh in a constituency in an Assembly Election.

If any party or candidate is found practising any of the above, their election can be rejected by the court even after they have won the election. In addition to the laws, all the political parties in our country have agreed to a Model code of conduct for an election campaign.

According to this, no party or candidate can

- use any place of worship for election propaganda
- use government vehicles, aircraft and officials for elections
- once elections are announced, ministers shall not lay foundation stones of any project, take any big policy decision or make any promise of providing public facilities.

Polling

On the day when dying voters cast or 'poll' their vote is called an Election Day. Every person whose name is on the voters' list can go to a nearby potting booth and cast his/her vote through a Secret ballot. Once the voter goes inside the booth, the election official identify him/ her, put a mark on the voter's finger and allow him/ her to cast his/ her vote.

An agent of each candidate is allowed to sit inside the polling booth and ensure that the voting takes place in a fair way. Earlier voting was done, by putting a stamp on the ballot paper. A ballot paper is a sheet of paper on which the names of the contesting candidates along with party name and symbols are listed. Now Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) are used to record votes. The machine shows the names of the candidates and the party symbols. The voter has to press the button against the name of the candidate, he/she wants to cast his/her vote.

Counting of Votes

Once the polling is over, all the EVMs are sealed and taken to a secure place. A few days later, on a fixed date, all the EVMs are opened and the votes secured by each candidate are counted. The candidate who secures the highest number of votes from a constituency is declared elected. Within a few hours of counting, all the results are declared. In general elections, the counting of votes in all constituencies takes place at the same time, on the same day. Within a few hours of counting, all the results are declared and it becomes clear as to who will form the next government. This event is reported by television channels, radio and newspapers.

What Makes Elections In India Democratic?

There are many factors which ensure that elections held in India are democratic. An independent body 'Election Commission' responsible to conduct elections is formulated in the Constitution of India.

Independent Election Commission :

In our country, elections are conducted by an independent and very powerful Election Commission (EC). It enjoys the same kind of independence that the judiciary enjoys. The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is appointed by the President of India. But once appointed, he is not answerable to even the President or the government. Powers of Election Commission Powers enjoyed by Election Commission are.

- It takes decisions on every aspect of conduct and control of elections right from the announcement of elections to the declaration of results.
- It implements the code of conduct and punishes any candidate or party that violates it.
- During the election period, the Election Commission can order the government to follow some guidelines to prevent the use and misuse of governmental power to enhance its chances to win elections or to transfer some government officials.
- When on election duty, government officers work under the control of the Election Commission and not the government.
- When election officials come to the opinion that polling was not fair in some booths or even an entire constituency, they order a repoll.

Popular Participation

The participation and enthusiasm of people in an election is another criterion to check the quality of elections.

If the election process is not free or fair, people will not continue to participate in the

exercise. People's participation in election is usually measured by voter turnout figures. Turnout indicates the per cent of eligible voters who actually cast their vote. In India, there is greater voter turn out of poor illiterate people as compared to western democracies.

Acceptance of Election Outcome

The outcome of elections-the final test of the free and fairness of it. If elections are not free or fair, the outcome always favours the powerful. In such a situation, the ruling parties do not lose elections. Usually, losing party does not accept the outcome of a rigged election.

The outcome of India's election speaks for itself

- The ruling parties routinely lose elections in India both at the national and state level.
- In the US, an incumbent or sitting elected representative rarely loses an election. But in India, about half of the sitting MPs or MLAs lose elections.
- Candidates who are known to have spent a lot of money on buying votes and those with Known criminal connection often lose elections.
- Except for some disputed elections, the electoral outcomes are usually accepted by the defeated party as 'people's verdict'.

Challenges to Free and Fair Elections

The challenges to free and fair elections are listed as follows

- Candidates and parties with a lot of money may not be sure of their victory but they do enjoy an unfair advantage over smaller parties and independents.
- Some candidates with criminal records are able to secure party tickets from major parties due to their connections political.
- Some families tend to dominate political parties; a tendency for the dynastic rule is very common.
- Elections offer only little choice to ordinary citizens. All the major parties are quite similar to each other both in policies and practice.
- Smaller parties and independent candidates suffer a huge disadvantage compared to bigger parties in terms of money power and organisational support.

These challenges exist not only in India but also in many established democracies. This is a matter of concern for all who believe in democracy. This is the reason due to which there is the demand for reforms in our electoral system by citizens, social activists and organisations.

Summary

The most common form of democracy in our times is for the people to govern through their representatives.

The mechanism by which people can choose their representatives at regular intervals is called Election.

In elections, the voters can choose who will form the government. Each vote has an equal value.

As an alternative to elections, all the people can sit together every day and take all the decisions, but this is not possible in large communities.

The procedure of elections favours political competition among different political parties.

Electoral Competition creates a sense of disunity and factionalism in every locality.

Different political parties and candidates often use a dirty trick like booth capturing, allegations to win elections.

In India, the General Election for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha is held regularly after every five years and elections are held in all constituencies at the same time.

Sometimes an election is held for one constituency to fill the vacancy caused by death or resigning of a member. This is known as By-election.

In India, an area based system of representation is followed where the country is divided into different areas for election purposes is called Electoral Constituencies.

For Lok Sabha election, India is divided into 543 constituencies. The representatives elected from each constituency are called Members of Parliament or MPs.

For Vidhan Sabha, each state is divided into the number of Assembly constituencies. The elected representative from each Assembly constituency is called Members of Legislative Assembly or MLAs.

Each village or town is divided into several wards and the same electoral procedure takes place for Panchayat and Municipal Elections.

A special system of Reserved Constituencies for the weaker sections especially for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) is also followed in India.

Reservation is also followed for seats in rural and urban local bodies, for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and women.

In democratic elections, the list of people eligible to vote is prepared much before the election and is officially called the Electoral Roll or the Voter's List. Which is updated from time to time.

In our country, all the citizens aged 18 years and above have the Right to Vote regardless of his or her caste, religion or gender. This is known as the Universal Adult Franchise.

A new system of Election Photo Identity Card (EPIC) has been introduced. The voters are required to carry this card when they go out to vote so that no one can vote in the place of someone else.

Political parties nominate their candidates who get the party support and symbol. Party's nomination is often called Party Ticket. The candidate has to fill a nomination form and give some money as a security deposit.

Candidate getting the party ticket should be 25 or above and has to declare educational qualifications, assets, liabilities and criminal cases pending if any.

In our country, election campaign takes place for a two-week period between the announcement of the final list of candidates and the date of polling.

Each political party has to agree to the Model Code of Conduct. Violation of the code can result in the rejection of the candidate.

On the day when the voters cast or poll their vote is called an Election Day and such voting is done through Secret Ballot.

Voting is done through ballot papers and Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).

Counting is done on a fixed date and the candidate securing the highest number of votes is declared a winner from that constituency.

In our country, elections are conducted by an independent and very powerful body, known as Election Commission.

The Chief Election Commissioner. (CEC) is appointed by the President of India, and is, not answerable to the President or the government.

The election commission takes decisions on each and every aspect of the elections.

People's turnout in the elections indicate a free and fair election procedure.

The political parties have to accept the outcome of the elections in all circumstances.

Due to some challenges to a free and fair election, there is the demand of reforms in our electoral system by citizens, social activists and organisations.