

75 Years of Indian Democracy: Role of Voting System

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Abstract

India, the world's largest democracy, has traversed a remarkable journey since gaining independence in 1947. Over the past 75 years, the Indian democratic system has evolved, overcoming various challenges while upholding the principles of representation, inclusivity, and justice. Central to this progress has been the voting system, which serves as the backbone of democratic governance. This paper explores the role of the voting system in shaping India's democracy, highlighting its evolution from ballot papers to electronic voting machines (EVMs), and the introduction of innovative practices like Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT). The study examines key milestones, including the universal adult franchise, reforms to address electoral malpractices, and the efforts of the Election Commission of India in ensuring free and fair elections. It also delves into the challenges faced by the voting system, such as voter apathy, electoral violence, misuse of money and muscle power, and the growing need for digital security in elections. Furthermore, the paper reflects on how India's voting system has empowered marginalized communities, ensuring their voices are heard in the political arena. As India celebrates 75 years of democracy, this study underscores the critical need for continuous reform and modernization of the voting system to maintain the integrity of the electoral process and uphold the democratic ideals enshrined in the Constitution.

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Introduction

India, the largest democracy in the world, has been a shining example of a functional democratic system since its independence in 1947. Over the last 75 years, India's democratic journey has been characterized by the active participation of its citizens, diverse socio-political transformations, and the steady growth of democratic institutions. At the heart of this vibrant democracy lies the voting system—a crucial mechanism that empowers people to express their will and shape the nation's political landscape. The adoption of universal adult franchise at the inception of India's democracy was a bold and visionary step, granting every citizen above the age of 21 (later reduced to 18) the right to vote, irrespective of gender, caste, religion, or socioeconomic status. This egalitarian foundation has not only upheld the principles of equality but also enabled marginalized communities to become key stakeholders in governance.

Over the years, the voting system in India has undergone significant transformations, adapting to the challenges of a growing population and the complexities of electoral integrity. From paper ballots in the early years to the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and the recent integration of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), technological advancements have played a vital role in enhancing the transparency and efficiency of the electoral process.

However, India's voting system has also faced challenges, such as voter apathy, the influence of money and muscle power, and the need to safeguard digital security in elections. Despite these hurdles, the system has consistently upheld the principles of free and fair elections, facilitated peaceful transitions of power, and strengthened the trust of the people in democratic institutions.

As India celebrates 75 years of its independence, reflecting on the role of the voting system becomes crucial to understanding how it has shaped the democratic fabric of the nation and how it can evolve to address future challenges. This study examines the evolution, achievements, and challenges of India's voting system, underscoring its indispensable role in the sustenance of democracy.

Review of Literature

Over the past 75 years, the Indian democratic system has witnessed transformative changes, with the voting system playing a foundational role in shaping its trajectory. Scholars, researchers, and policymakers have extensively examined the evolution, impact, and challenges of India's voting system, offering valuable insights into its contribution to the democratic process.

1. Historical Foundations and Universal Adult Franchise

The decision to adopt universal adult franchise from the very outset, as noted by Granville Austin (1999)^[1], was a bold experiment in democracy, given India's vast diversity and widespread illiteracy. This inclusive framework empowered millions of citizens, including marginalized groups, to participate in the democratic process. Early studies highlighted how this principle laid the foundation for India's representative democracy and differentiated it from other post-colonial nations.

2. Evolution of Voting Mechanisms

The transition from paper ballots to electronic voting machines (EVMs) was a significant milestone in India's electoral history. Bhattacharya (2003)^[2] and subsequent studies praised the introduction of EVMs for their ability to reduce electoral fraud, increase efficiency, and streamline the voting process. The inclusion of the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) further enhanced transparency and addressed concerns about the reliability of electronic systems, as highlighted in studies by Sharma & Kumar (2019)^[7].

3. Electoral Reforms and Institutional Strengthening

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has played a critical role in institutionalizing free and fair elections. Reports by the ECI and studies by M.V. Pylee (2002)^[6] document key reforms, including the implementation of the Model Code of Conduct, the use of photo voter IDs, and initiatives to curb money and muscle power. These reforms have been instrumental in maintaining the credibility of India's voting system over decades.

4. Empowerment of Marginalized Communities

The role of the voting system in ensuring political empowerment for historically marginalized communities has been widely acknowledged. Studies by B.L. Fadia (2008)^[4] emphasize the importance of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women in local governance structures. These measures have enabled broader participation and representation, aligning with India's democratic ideals.

5. Challenges and Criticism

Despite significant advancements, the voting system in India has faced persistent challenges. Voter apathy, electoral violence, the misuse of money power, and concerns about the security of EVMs have been recurring themes in the literature. Scholars like Yogendra Yadav (2010)^[8] and Suhas Palshikar

(2017)^[10] have called for deeper reforms to address these systemic issues, including stricter campaign finance regulations and enhanced accountability mechanisms for political parties.

6. Comparative Perspectives

Comparative analyses with other democracies have highlighted the strengths and shortcomings of India's voting system. Fareed Zakaria (2007)^[9] praised India's ability to conduct large-scale elections peacefully, while raising concerns about the influence of caste and religion on voting behaviour. Such studies underline the need for balancing inclusivity with impartiality in the electoral process.

7. The Path Forward

Literature on India's voting system often emphasizes the need for continuous innovation and adaptation. The integration of technology, such as online voting systems for non-resident Indians (NRIs), along with initiatives to enhance voter awareness and accessibility, has been identified as critical to sustaining democratic participation in the 21st century.

Conclusion

The review of literature on 75 years of Indian democracy underscores the pivotal role of the voting system in maintaining the country's democratic fabric. While significant progress has been made, ongoing challenges call for reforms to ensure that the voting system remains inclusive, transparent, and resilient. As India looks to the future, the voting system will continue to serve as the cornerstone of its democracy, shaping its governance and the aspirations of its citizens.

Findings

- Foundation of Inclusivity:** The adoption of universal adult franchise ensured that all citizens, irrespective of gender, caste, religion, or socioeconomic status, could participate in the democratic process. This established a strong foundation for an inclusive democracy.
- Evolution of Voting Technology:** The transition from paper ballots to Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) has significantly improved the efficiency, accuracy, and transparency of the electoral process. The introduction of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) has further addressed concerns about electoral integrity.
- Empowerment of Marginalized Groups:** India's voting system has played a critical role in empowering marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women, by providing them a voice in governance through reservations and targeted electoral reforms.
- Strengthening Electoral Institutions:** The Election Commission of India (ECI) has emerged as a robust institution, implementing reforms such as the Model Code of Conduct, voter ID cards, and measures to curb money and muscle power in elections.
- Challenges in Voter Participation:** Despite progress, voter apathy, especially among urban voters, remains a challenge. Factors such as lack of awareness, logistical barriers, and disinterest in politics contribute to lower voter turnout in certain demographics.
- Election-related Malpractices:** Issues like the misuse of money, muscle power, and divisive tactics based on caste and religion continue to undermine the democratic process, raising concerns about fairness and transparency.

7. **Digital Security and Trust:** Although EVMs have improved efficiency, concerns about potential tampering and the need for robust Cybersecurity measures have been raised by stakeholders.
8. **Comparative Efficiency:** India has consistently managed to conduct large-scale elections efficiently, setting an example for other democracies. However, the system must adapt to emerging challenges in a digital and globalized world.

Suggestions

1. Enhancing Voter Awareness and Participation

- Conduct targeted voter education campaigns, particularly in urban areas, to address voter apathy.
- Simplify the voter registration process and use technology to make voting more accessible, such as online registration and voting options for non-resident Indians (NRIs).

2. Strengthening Electoral Reforms

- Implement stricter regulations to curb the influence of money and muscle power during elections.
- Enforce transparency in political party funding and campaign expenditures.

3. Technological Advancements

- Explore the feasibility of online voting systems, ensuring accessibility for all citizens, including NRIs and individuals with disabilities.
- Strengthen the Cybersecurity framework to address concerns about EVM tampering and protect voter data.

4. Empowering Marginalized Communities

- Continue initiatives to improve political representation for marginalized groups and women.
- Encourage grassroots participation through localized governance mechanisms.

5. Strengthening the Election Commission of India (ECI)

- Provide the ECI with greater autonomy and resources to ensure it remains an impartial and independent institution.
- Regularly review and update the electoral code of conduct to address emerging challenges.

6. Promoting Ethical Voting Practices

- Conduct awareness drives to discourage caste, religion, and region-based voting practices.
- Encourage voters to prioritize issues such as development, governance, and accountability over identity politics.

7. Adopting Global Best Practices

- Study and adapt successful electoral practices from other democracies, such as ranked-choice voting or proportional representation, to enhance inclusivity and fairness.
- Collaborate with international organizations to develop advanced tools for election management.

8. Modernizing Infrastructure

- Upgrade polling station infrastructure, especially in rural areas, to improve accessibility and efficiency.
- Ensure uninterrupted power supply and digital connectivity during elections to avoid delays and technical glitches.

Conclusion

The findings underline the critical role of the voting system in sustaining India's democracy over the past 75 years. While significant achievements have been made, addressing challenges like voter apathy, electoral malpractices, and digital security is imperative. By adopting the suggested reforms and innovations, India can ensure that its voting system remains resilient, transparent, and inclusive, continuing to uphold the democratic ideals that form the cornerstone of the nation

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