Credibility of Elections and Democracy in India

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Myron Weiner’s Four ‘Measures’

Elections & Democracy

- Competitive Elections
- Universal Political Freedom
- Peaceful Transfer of Power
- Real Power with Elected Governments
Democracy and Elections in India

Genuine

- Political power only through elections
- Elections institutionalized
- Voter has choice
- Change of governments
- Political competition

Deep rooted

- 1977 verdict
- Peaceful transfers of power
  Eg: 2004 verdict
- Broadened representational base.
  Eg: Dalit and OBC empowerment
- Towards balanced federalism
Democracy and Elections in India

Example: Elections led to widening of representational base of Legislatures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of election</th>
<th>% of Members from &quot;Forward Castes&quot;</th>
<th>% of “Backward Caste Members”</th>
<th>% of farmers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>51.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is Indian electoral process credible?

- Elections broadly reflective of public opinion
- Powerful parties and candidates do lose.
- Strong Institution of Election Commission

Rejection vote common
- Over 50% of incumbents lost in 2004 Parliament polls.

No state-sponsored interventions in the process
Why are Indian elections credible? (contd.)

Traditional neutrality of officials/bureaucracy

- *Pre-Polling process* scrupulously fair and transparent (nominations, ballot papers, appointment of polling officials etc.)

- *Post-polling process* is completely non-partisan and transparent (transport, storage and counting of ballots and declaration of results)

- A system of compensatory errors - competing distortions neutralize each other!

- Independent Judiciary
Deficiencies in Indian Elections

- Flawed electoral rolls
- Polling irregularities
- Unaccounted and illegitimate use of money power
- Rampant criminalization
- Autocratic political parties
Process Improvements in Indian Elections

- Improvements in voter registration, lists and ID
  - Voter ID Cards
  - Post Offices as Nodal Agency (2004)
  - Nationwide initiative to improve voters lists
    Voters’ List Irregularities came down from 15% (1999) to 5.1% (2004).
    Lok Satta survey

- Electronic voting machines

- Disclosure of candidates’ financial, criminal and educational antecedents (Supreme Court Judgments in 2002, 2003)
Process Improvements in Indian Elections (contd.)

- Political Funding Reform Law (2003)
  - 100% tax exemption to donors (both individual and corporate)
  - Mandatory disclosure of donations above Rs. 20,000
  - Free air time on public and private electronic media to parties

- Citizens’ efforts to check entry of new criminals into politics
  
  Election Watch activities in some states
Systemic Improvements yet to be in place

- **Electoral and political incentives** need to be realigned to
  - change rules of the game – not mere change in players
  - fully eliminate money power, criminal elements from elections
  - make honest and people-centered politics always winnable
  - make politics a means for nation building

- **Representational distortions** need to be eliminated
  - Elections must capture social/voting diversity
  - Fairer representation to scattered minorities
Systemic Improvements yet to be in place (contd.)

- **Genuinely democratic political parties**
  - to bring truly competent people into politics
  - better choice for voters
  - parties as efficient vehicles for citizens’/supporters’ aspirations

- **Improved accountability to check abuse of power**
  - Instruments of Accountability like Right to Information (2005), Citizen’s Charters in government offices
  - making elected governments truly accountable to citizens
“At the bottom of all the tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into the little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper…..”

- Winston Churchill