



Understanding electoral democracy: Theoretical perspectives and institutional practices

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Abstract

Electoral democracy is a form of representative democracy in which popular election is considered the only legitimate source of political authority. Primarily, electoral democracies are understood as political systems in which citizens enjoy the right to elect the executive and the legislature. Theoretically, electoral democracy has two different dimensions: procedural (minimalist) and substantive (maximalist). At the same time, its major principles include: political equality, political liberty, and popular sovereignty. The conceptual framework of electoral democracy has been enriched by several thinkers through various theories. In India, constitutional institutions have been developed to manage electoral functions. As the world's largest democracy, India's resilience relies on an independent and impartial election apparatus, namely, the Election Commission of India.

Keywords: Electoral democracy, conceptual frame work, theoretical perspectives, institutional aspect

Introduction

Democracy is as old as the Greek period and precisely around 2,500 years old. It first appeared in the 5th century BC in Athens (Dahl, 1989) [7]. The very term democracy has come from the Greek root *demos*, meaning the "people," and *kratia*, meaning "power." Thus, democracy essentially means a system where the power remains with the people. In the language of Cleon, a Greek philosopher, "that shall be democratic which shall of the people, by the people, for the people." In modern times, this sentiment was famously repeated by American President Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address (Lincoln, 1863).

Ordinarily, democracy refers to a political system characterized by adult franchise, periodic elections, political parties, an independent judiciary, representative and responsible government, strong public opinion, freedom of the press, and constitutional fundamental rights. Modern democratic states have representative governments elected on the principle of universal adult franchise. In such forms of government, the representatives are chosen by the people through elections; hence, elections have assumed a vital role in the making of modern representative or electoral democracy (Schumpeter, 1942) [31]. Thus, election is considered as life line of democracy. This paper examines the institutional practices in India vis-à-vis theoretical postulates.

Conceptual Frame Work

Electoral democracy primarily refers to a representative system based on election and voting. It implies a democratic government based on a system that enables all citizens to select a candidate, as per their choice, from the list of competitors for political office (Diamond, 1999) [9]. Electoral democracy is, thus, a form of representative democracy in which popular election is considered the only legitimate source of political authority. The electoral process ensures the principle of political equality based on universal adult franchise, irrespective of caste, color, creed, sex, religion, or economic status. Further, the elections are

regular, open, and competitive. Each citizen casts a secret ballot as per his choice in a free and fair manner. Here, electoral democracies are understood as political systems in which citizens enjoy the right to elect the executive and the legislature.

As a political system, electoral democracy has two different dimensions: procedural (minimalist) and substantive (maximalist) (Przeworski, 1999) [28].

- **Procedural (Minimalist) Dimension:** This dimension focuses heavily on procedures and methods which make democracy functional. It ensures regular and competitive elections based on universal adult franchise and plural political participation which lead to the formation of a democratically elected government (Schumpeter, 1942) [31].
- **Substantive (Maximalist) Dimension:** It attaches great importance to substantive outcomes like social equality rather than just routine procedures. It focuses on the "common good" in place of the benefit of limited individuals. It upholds redistributive justice through which the rights of marginalized sections including women and the poor, are protected (Held, 2006) [13].

The major principles of electoral democracy include:

- **Popular Sovereignty:** The essence of electoral democracy is popular sovereignty, where supreme power rests with the common people. The French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1997) [30] advocated the concept of popular sovereignty, stating that the people possess all powers in the state where as the government is only an agent to carry out the voice of the people. In the language of James Wilford Garner (1910) [10], "The sovereignty of the people, therefore, can mean nothing more than the power of the majority of the electorate, in a country where a system of universal suffrage prevails" (p. 139).
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participate in its political process. According to Laski (1925) ^[15], political liberty "means the power to be active in the affairs of the state" (p. 142). Thus, it includes the right to vote, to seek election, to hold public office, and to offer constructive criticism of government policies. Laski provides two conditions for the successful enjoyment of political liberty: (1) the spread of education and (2) the free flow of honest information.

- **Political Equality:** Electoral democracy ensures political equality, providing equal political rights and access to all offices of authority. It guarantees every adult citizen the right to vote, hold public office, and critique the policies of the government, forming the baseline of democracy (Dahl, 2006) ^[8].

Theoretical Perspectives of Electoral Democracy

1. Classical Democracy

Classical democracy is related to the Greek version of democracy which worked in the *polis*, or the city-state of Ancient Greece (Aristotle, trans. 1998) ^[1]. The unique feature of such democracy was that the citizens remained politically active and conscious, directly contributing to decision-making in the Assembly. However, it did not grant citizenship to women, slaves, or foreigners. Remarkably, it was due to the labor of slaves and women, the Athenian male citizens gained the free hours required to devote time for political affairs. Plato (trans. 1991) ^[26] became highly critical of Athenian democracy, arguing that ordinary people were unable of ruling themselves wisely for which they required the leadership of philosopher-kings and guardians.

2. Elitist Theory

The elitist theory of democracy emerged as a new liberal framework developed by Italian sociologists Vilfredo Pareto (1916/1935) and Gaetano Mosca (1939). Robert Michels (1911/1915), James Burnham (1941) ^[3, 21, 23, 24], and others developed the theory further. The theory posits that every society is ruled by a minority that effectively governs, dividing the political system into the governors (the elite) and the governed.

Pareto (1915) conceptualized the governing elite, consisting of a small number of persons who exercise ruling functions politically and socially. Gaetano Mosca (1939) ^[23] similarly characterized society by two classes: the organized ruling minority (the elite) and the unorganized majority (the governed). Robert Michels (1915) ^[21] formulated the "iron law of oligarchy," which argues that an active minority will always govern a passive majority within any complex organization. C. Wright Mills (1956) ^[22] analyzed the "power elite," referring to those who occupy the commanding managerial posts of modern society and share a high degree of social cohesiveness due to similar backgrounds. James Burnham (1941) ^[3] advanced the idea of "managerial elites," which emerge from a combination of industrial managers and state bureaucrats.

3. Pluralist Democracy

The idea behind the pluralist theory of democracy is that the power in modern democracies is shared among different autonomous groups, interest associations, and leaders (Dahl, 1961) ^[5]. Prominent group theorists interpreted democracy as a political framework balanced by a variety of competing

groups (Bentley, 1908; Latham, 1952; Truman, 1951). Robert Dahl (1971) ^[2, 6, 16, 32] developed a unique model of the democratic process which he named "polyarchy." In a pluralist democracy, the policy making process is highly decentralized and characterized by bargaining and mutual consultation among relatively autonomous interest groups.

4. Participatory Democracy

The concept of pluralist democracy traces its roots back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill (1861/1958). While all democracies rely on popular consent, the participation of citizens is often be limited to just voting in practice. In modern representative systems, the divisions of caste, class, religion, and region has widened the gap between elected representatives and the public. In contrast to pluralist and elitist theories, participatory democracy pleads for active, continuous participation of citizens in policymaking for promoting the common good (Macpherson, 1977; Pateman, 1970) ^[19, 25].

5. Deliberative Democracy

In deliberative democracy, the political decisions are based on fair, reasonable, and public deliberations among citizens rather than mere aggregate voting outcomes. John Rawls (1993) and Jürgen Habermas (1996) ^[11, 29] are the primary modern exponents of this view. Rawls argued that 'public deliberation allows reason to overcome self-interest to attain a just society', while Habermas claimed that 'fair communicative procedures ensure legitimate, mutually agreed-upon decisions'.

6. People's Democracy

The Marxist democratic models develop the concept of people's democracy. Marxists emphasize substantive socio-economic equality, critiquing western models which generate only superficial political equality (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002) ^[20]. A people's democracy emerges

Kant's (1795/1991) ^[14] idea of universal peace, modern theorists like David Held argue for global citizenship and increased representation of marginalized, developing nations in global governance.

9. E-Democracy

The digital revolution has introduced "E-democracy" (electronic democracy), which utilizes digital communication and information technology to enhance or replace traditional aspects of representative democracy. By bridging the spatial and temporal constraints of physical deliberation, advocates of e-democracy leverage digital networks to realize the core goals of participatory democracy in a modern setting (Coleman & Norris, 2005) ^[4].

Institutional Aspect: The Election Commission of India (ECI)

In practice, the elections are considered as the universal tools for choosing representatives. At the same time, free and fair elections are the *sine qua non* (essential condition) of a democratic setup, working on the principle of political equality: "one person, one vote."

As the world's largest democracy, India's resilience relies on an independent and impartial election apparatus. Indian constitution provides for a centralized election machinery under Article 324—the Election Commission of India (ECI)—established on January 25, 1950. The commission holds permanent constitutional authority over the superintendence, direction, and control of elections to parliament, state legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President of India. The commission works through functional and territorial distribution of works. The works of the commission are organised in Divisions, Branches and Sections. The important functional divisions are Administration, Electoral Roll, Election Expenditure Management, Information Systems, International Cooperation, Judicial, Media, Planning, Political Parties, Secretariat Co-ordination, and Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP). The states and union territories are grouped into separate zones for convenience of management.

At the state level, there is a Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) who is appointed by the Commission from amongst senior civil servants from a panel of officers proposed by the concerned state government. The CEO supervise election works, subject to overall superintendence, direction and control of the commission. At the district levels, the District Election Officers manage the electoral works under the superintendence and direction of the CEO and ultimately the commission.

Procedural Aspect

The formal timeline managed by the ECI ensures structural transitions of power through several key operational phases:

1. Announcement of election dates
2. Filing of nomination papers
3. Scrutiny of nominations
4. Allotment of symbols
5. Withdrawal of nominations
6. Publication of the final candidate list
7. Public campaigning
8. Casting of votes (Secret ballot)
9. Announcement of results

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the years, the ECI has been successfully strengthening our electoral system thereby the democratic fabric. The ECI has established the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM) in June 2011 as a global knowledge and capacity-building centre dedicated to advancing democratic governance and strengthening electoral integrity. It serves as an international forum for dialogue, learning, and innovation on democratic processes, bringing together experts, institutions, and practitioners from around the world. In addition to conducting free and fair election in peaceful manner, the ECI provides useful guidance to several countries of the world on electoral democratic process.

To maintain fairness, the ECI enforces a set of Model Code of Conduct for all political parties and candidates. Ultimately, whether interpreted through the lens of pluralism, elitism, or Marxism, electoral democracy remains widely recognized as a highly resilient mechanism to protect fundamental human rights and assert intrinsic human equality.

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