

Role of Media in Free and Fair Elections



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Abstract

Democracy is a form of government in which all eligible citizens participate equally, either directly or through their elected representatives. Openness and accountability are generally considered as the cornerstones of a democratic system. However, various reasons such as lack of open political debate or an informed electorate, interference with campaigns, tampering with the election mechanism and unfair rules, etc. often prevent an election from being "free and fair". Undoubtedly, here the media plays a very critical role as it inculcates contemporary thinking as well as provides conduit necessary for all kinds of communication which help societies to exist and function.

Today media timely, equitably, fairly and in balanced manner helps to communicate information necessary for the society as well for the constituents of such societies so that they may make informed choices about whom to elect and whom not to elect to positions of authority.

Infact, the media today has a significant impact upon the population of the country. This is evident from the mobile and Facebook revolution through which more and more people are not just communicating but also expressing their political speech and ideas. In 2005, YouTube was an instant success having millions of users in its first year. Also, in September 2013, the Facebook Inc reached 1 billion active users, a level of global penetration influencing the thinking of the society in general.

Keywords: Democracy, Election

Introduction

"Transparency may be the most disruptive and far-reaching innovation to come out of social media."

- **The New Influencers by Paul Gilin**¹

The word Election is derived from the word "elect" which means "to choose or make a decision".² Elections are the hallmark of representative democracy which allow people's regular input in choices about leaders and policy however, at the same time they are also competitive processes, unleashing conflict and tensions which if not constructively managed, could potentially destabilize the fabric of states and societies.³ For this reason free and fair elections are indispensable for the success of democracy.⁴ An important point to note here is that a free and fair election is not only about the freedom to vote and the knowledge of how to cast a vote, but is also about a participatory process where voters engage in public debate and have adequate information about parties, policies, candidates and the election process itself in order to make informed choices.⁵

Globally, India is the largest democracy in the world which with free media, democratic polity and a federal structure of government has experienced a long evolution of electoral practices enriching its democratic ethos. Thus, India is not just the largest democracy but it has also been marvelled the massive exercise of conducting free and fair elections.⁶

Problems Preventing Free and Fair Election

Generally when elections are called, the politicians and their supporters attempt to influence the voters in various manners so as to compete directly for the votes of constituents and therefore, where there exists a weak rule of law, the elections do not meet the international standards of being "free and fair". There is often interference of the incumbent government as these incumbent ministers often use the powers of the executive (police, martial law, censorship, physical implementation of the election mechanism, etc.) as well as of the legislature (passing criminal laws, defining the electoral mechanisms including eligibility and district boundaries by using majority or supermajority through influence), to remain in power despite of the popular opinion in favour of their removal. Sometimes even the Non-governmental entities also interfere with elections, through physical force, verbal intimidation, or fraud, which results in improper casting or counting of votes. This is the prima facie reason for

which today monitoring and minimizing electoral fraud is an ongoing task in the democratic countries having strong traditions of free and fair elections.

Besides Some other Reasons that Prevent An Election From Being "Free and Fair" Include

Lack of open political debate or an informed electorate due to lack of freedom of press, lack of objectivity in the press due to state or corporate control, lack of access to news and political media and curtailed Freedom of speech by the state favouring certain viewpoints or state propaganda.

Unfair rules which includes Gerrymandering, exclusion of opposition candidates from eligibility for office, and manipulating thresholds for electoral success.

Interference with campaigns by those in power.

Tampering with the election mechanism which includes confusing or misleading voters about how to vote, violation of the secret ballot, ballot stuffing, tampering with voting machines, destruction of legitimately cast ballots, voter suppression, voter registration fraud, failure to validate voter residency, fraudulent tabulation of results, and use of physical force or verbal intimidation at polling places.^[2]

This is exactly where in modern democratic societies which entail representative governments, media plays a very essential role as it ensures information (social, economic and political) which is vital to the existence, survival and development of constituents of such societies.^{[2][7]} Media not only reminds politicians about their unfulfilled promises at the time of elections but it also provides a platform in order to enable parties and candidates to interact with the public.^[5]

Role and Impact of Media

In order to safeguard the transparency of the process of election the media often acts as a crucial watch dog by exposing errors of commission or omission by those in power, alerting citizens to electoral malpractices, exposing schemes to disadvantage those outside the corridors of power and by exposing manipulation of citizens through the distribution of bribes and other illegal niceties during campaign periods, etc. It also plays an important role in exposing the loopholes in the democratic system which ultimately helps government in filling these vacuums, making the system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly^[7]. Thus, media not only helps in educating voters but it also helps in building peace in various ways.^{[3][5][6][7][8][9]}

Looking at the significant roles that media needs to fulfil, media needs to maintain a high level of professionalism, accuracy and impartiality in their coverage^[5] however this is exactly where the private newspapers and majority of television channels often lag behind. Since these channels and newspapers are more commercialized unfortunately, these often in order to earn profits or for some other reasons tend to publish or broadcast statements in favour of the parties and candidates they prefer or choose. This is evident from the blatant misuse of print and electronic media which happened in 2004 and 2009 where the parties and candidates contesting the general elections came to light for institutionalizing paid news

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in print and electronic media so as to influence public opinion especially during the elections.^{[6][9]}

The Constitution of India as well as other existing legislations in India such as the IT Act 2008, the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and the Income Tax Act, 1961 provide various powers to the Election Commission of India so as to enable it to deal with the problems relating to electoral frauds, etc.^{[6][7]} The Election Commission in exercise of these powers and in order to strengthen democracy and enhance the fairness of elections, has since years conducted various laudable electoral reforms which are quite adequate and admirable.^[4] But here also when it comes to pushing these reforms for implementation the role of independent media and an enlightened public opinion have no substitutes.^[4]

In 2008 and in 2012 the US President Barack Obama's campaign team very effectively used the social media during the presidential elections.^{[10][11][12]} however, in India the Election Commission's 'Pappu' campaign, 2008 which targeted the youth for an increased voting did not turn out to be very effective as the increase in voter turnout was very marginal i.e. 53.4% in 2003 to only 57.6% in 2008.^{[13][14]} Also, in April 2009, out of a total 715 million in the registered electorate only 400 million voters turned out to elect 543 Members of Parliament during the general elections to the Lok Sabha.^[6]

Today despite of having various drawbacks the impact of media is really noteworthy.^[7] The Digital media is not only empowering citizens to ask questions and demand answers but it is also influencing opinions as well as pushing leaders to be more transparent. Even the Social media companies are also doing their bit to raise political awareness among people. This is quite evident from the "Register to Vote" initiative launched on Facebook as well as from the service offered by Twitter under which the users can follow someone through a missed call or text message.^[10]

According to a report named "Social Media in India -2013" by Internet and Mobile Association of India and IMRB released in October 2013, 19.8 million users access social media platforms via their mobile phone in urban India. Besides, while Times of India has over 35 lakh fans on Facebook, the Hindustan Times has over 12 lakhs, Dainik Jagran has over 16 lakhs and the Economic Times has over 14 lakhs fans which are more than double its circulation. From this it is quite evident that while the traditional media has a strong following on social media one cannot ignore the impact of social and digital media and its influence on the elections. Infact today social media is the fastest way to directly engage with audience especially when there could be last minute coups.^[15]

According to a recent Google survey, it is believed that social media can have an impact on around 30% seats in Lok Sabha Elections 2014 which means that the social media is likely to influence 160 of India's 543 Parliamentary constituencies making Facebook and Twitter users the nation's newest voting bloc as per IAMAI.^[16]

Besides, according to Business Today survey, conducted in 12 cities by market research firm MDRA in October, 2013, nearly 95% respondents

said they were following the digital campaigns of political parties.^[10]

A significant achievement of media is also evident from the awareness spread by media among the rural illiterate masses which is quite visible from the percentage increase in the number of voters all over the country.^[5] In 2013 while in Mizoram 83.41% of registered voters exercised their right to vote, in Chhattisgarh it was 77%, Rajasthan it was 75.65% and in Madhya Pradesh it was 72.66%.^[17]

Even the Indian politicians and top leaders in today's time, realizing the importance of media are very active on Facebook and Twitter.^[10] Recently, the BJP leader Narendra Modi and Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi have been the two most searched politicians on Internet.^[18] The Aam Admi Party (lead by Arvind Kejriwal and his team) in order to popularise the Jan Lokpal movement have also used media by setting up a web page called "India Against Corruption".^{[19][15]}

Conclusion

There is no doubt that media has over time proved to be a potent tool to gain voter confidence quickly, and more effectively.^[14] The present media revolution has helped people in making an informed decisions and this has led to beginning of a new era in a democracy. Even the campaigning in elections is no longer about assimilating crowds and distributing freebies.^[7]

Media in today's time is not only an integral part of our daily lives but with the passage of time it has become a more matured and a more responsible entity. However, like it is said that nothing is perfect in this world, so is the media as there is still a lot of scope for its improvement in order to raise it upto the aspirations of the people for which it is meant.^[7]

For this there is a need of a more uniform regulations and guidelines for both public and private as well as for print and electronic media in order to ensure a level playing field for all parties and candidates during campaigning. Besides there is also a need for a combination of efforts required to install a system of "checks and balances" which includes self regulation by media itself as well as guidelines from professional bodies such as academics, independent researchers, civil society groups and various regulatory agencies.^[6]

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