

A Call To Order

Written by

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Reville not politics. Reform it instead. And the first step towards it? Cast a vote for proportional representation. -Jayaprakash Narayan

Is Indian democracy at the crossroads? Certainly we have achieved a great deal; protection of freedoms, deepening participation, reasonable though sub-par economic growth, peaceful transfer of power and fierce political competition. And yet there is a sense of foreboding, a growing disquiet among senior leaders and concerned citizens. Politics is getting too polarised (Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh); there is great churning and rejection of the status quo (both the Congress and BJP were rejected in the recent state polls; the Congress and TDP are on the decline in Andhra Pradesh while the YSR Congress Party is on the rise); the buying of votes is rampant (it costs Rs 5-7 crore to contest an assembly seat in AP, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka); parties are forced to field criminals as candidates (UP, Bihar); reckless populism is hurting the exchequer; corruption is supreme; fiscal deficits are not under control; education and healthcare are in a shambles; governments in most states and at the Centre seem to be powerless to halt the slide, and politics is reviled as never before.

Where have we gone wrong? Blaming it all on politicians and parties is futile and counterproductive. The more we delegitimise politics, the harder it is to nurture good leadership and to summon the will and skill to improve things. For years, we pinned hopes on economic growth to somehow resolve our political crisis. But our political failures are undermining growth and opportunity for the poor. Modern economy cannot for long coexist with antediluvian politics.

We need to return to the initial conditions that existed when we gave ourselves democracy. During the freedom struggle, India was blessed with exceptional leadership across all regions and social groups. After independence, these freedom-fighters were the first-generation politicians and nation-builders. They did a great job integrating princely states, bringing order, building institutions and articulating a national vision. That is why India remains an oasis of robust democracy among nations liberated after the War.

However, power remained centralised. India became unique in that liberty and universal franchise coexisted with a high degree of centralisation (with citizens marginalised, and citizenship devalued), and there was abject dependence on those with power and influence for simple services (ration card, birth certificate, FIR registration, land records). The early, robust attempts to decentralise power were soon given up after a decade. This centralisation prevented the growth of local leadership and innovation. People were not enabled to discover the possibilities and limits of power. Asymmetry of power and poverty meant a desperate quest for daily necessities and elusive government services. The licence raj made things worse. The lower bureaucracy remained unaccountable and exploitative. People needed sifarish or bribe to get even the smallest thing done. The romance of freedom gave way to disenchantment within 20 years.

The hapless citizen had only one lever to get even simplest things done—the vote. The politician who sought it was the only one who would listen—or be forced to listen! The local MLA

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thus became the disguised executive, an elected maharaja, to get everything done. But he had no real, legal authority, and no means of really delivering. However hard he tried to intervene on a daily basis to reach some services to the people, the results remained unsatisfactory.

Soon the politician realised that people depended on him for everything, but he had no ability to deliver. And he had no time for his family or for pursuing any economic activity for an honest livelihood. Yet, it was a thankless task. There was neither the glory of freedom struggle, nor the satisfaction of getting things done. Only the odium of having to beg for votes, and the criticism and grumbling of dissatisfied voters. The politician soon came to the conclusion that honesty was incompatible with survival in politics. Many honest politicians faded out. Sons and daughters of entrenched politicians, or those who made politics and patronage a means of personal profit, became the dominant players in politics.

Armed with the realisation that honesty didn't pay in politics, a few politicians started inducing poor voters with money and liquor. Soon, most serious competitors followed suit. A large expenditure did not guarantee victory; but failure to spend almost certainly meant defeat. Big money became the entrance fee for political competition. Corruption fed the system. What started as a necessity became an opportunity, and natural resources, contracts, transfers, licences and permits—all became a source of private gain. With all major parties deploying big money in elections, more was needed to get votes. Intense populism and freebies became weapons in the electoral armoury. Instead of focusing on education, healthcare, skills and jobs, the poor began to be offered immediate, short-term palliatives (free rice, free power, colour TVs, bicycles, etc). However, after all parties caught on, freebies alone became insufficient to assure victory. The traditional caste, religious and regional divides in Indian society became fertile ground for political manipulation. It is easy to provoke primordial loyalties in a divided, heterogeneous society and pit one group against the other. The severe competition for patronage, higher education, jobs and political office could be easily channelised to provoke rivalries and jealousies, and fashion long-term votebanks. All these three—vote-buying, freebies and calling on primordial loyalties—are now the staple of electoral politics.

We can discern three phases of politics since 1947. The first phase (1947-67) saw nation-building and Congress monopoly. The second (1967-89) saw a challenge to Congress monopoly and the emergence of alternatives. The third phase (1989-2000) witnessed fierce competition for power in each state and at the national level. We are now entering a fourth phase—characterised by anger and ennui, delegitimisation of politics, cynicism, rejection of established parties, fragmentation, invoking primordial loyalties, zero-sum-game politics, rampant corruption, and increasing incapacity to address challenges or have an honest conversation with people, a failure of nerve, and intense, reckless populism.

Where do we go now? Is Indian politics bound to degenerate and lead to anarchy? Is our economy doomed because of failed politics? Will India be an also-ran, instead of being a major world economy? Will the next generation continue to suffer unnecessary poverty, pain and anguish? Is there a way out of the political morass? These are the inevitable questions today.

There is no simple silver bullet to resolve a long-incubating political crisis, no short-cuts to national rejuvenation. No single solution applies to all societies; answers that are relevant in one

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situation have no value in different circumstances. If we understand the levers of change in a context, then a rapid course correction is possible.

One critical factor trapping us into a vicious cycle is the importance of the marginal vote for victory in each constituency in our first-past-the-post (FPTP) system. In our system, a party or candidate is elected in each constituency on the basis of obtaining more votes than any other candidate. Such a system has the advantage of a comfortable majority for a ruling party. Only Britain and some of its former colonies, the US, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Canada have such a system. The US and the Philippines have a presidential system, and Pakistan has a president and cabinet sharing power, with the army dominating. Britain has different systems at other levels—local governments, regional parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, European Parliament and London city. The House of Commons alone is based on FPTP.

The FPTP works well in Britain. Its electorate is educated and well-informed; public discourse is intelligent and focused on issues and policies; there is no vote-buying; politics attracts the finest talent; parties offer alternative policies; new leadership and new ideas continue to emerge. In such a country, it makes no sense to change the electoral system.

In today's India, FPTP has different consequences. In FPTP, the total share of a candidate's or party's vote has no relevance. What matters is getting at least one more vote than the nearest rival. One more vote means victory; and one less voter means defeat. There are no second prizes in a winner-take-all system. The candidate is therefore desperate to woo the marginal vote for victory. In a poor country with rampant corruption, vote-buying is inevitable to induce the marginal voter. In FPTP, people rarely vote for the best candidate or party; they tend to vote for the second-worst party, for fear of being saddled with the worst option in their estimation. Even when better candidates or parties are available, voters all over the world hate to see their votes "wasted" on sure losers. In FPTP, usually the two dominant candidates/parties alone matter; and all behave similarly to get marginal votes. No matter who wins, they adopt similar methods, and nothing fundamentally changes after elections. Many voters, particularly those not induced by money, stay away from elections. As a general rule, the polling percentage in FPTP is 10-15 per cent lower than in proportional representation. If candidates stop buying votes, our polling percentage in many constituencies will be closer to 40 per cent, not 60 per cent.

Given the compulsions of FPTP in today's Indian conditions, parties are forced to deploy not the most desirable candidates, but those who can somehow win the marginal vote. Those with large amounts to spend on vote-buying (Rs 5-10 crore for an MLA in some states), or those who emerged as leaders of the caste that dominates in the constituency, or criminals with muscle power, money and caste-base emerge as ideal candidates for all serious parties competing for power. Even honest leaders genuinely striving to improve things have no choice but to deploy such candidates if they are to have a chance of gaining power and influence. Can we redefine victory and change incentives in politics? Can a different way of electing our leaders alter the course of politics? No electoral system is perfect. We have to look at practical and acceptable answers suitable to a society in a specific context. It is time we Indians focused on our electoral system, instead of reviling politicians and shunning public life. We need to create a framework in which incentives change, vote-buying is rendered unnecessary, honest politics is sustainable,

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policies and ideas gain precedence over prejudices, honest, competent and purposive citizens can get elected, and the vicious cycle of bad politics and corruption can be broken. A system which gives a party seats in the legislature in proportion to the votes it obtains—statewise—will radically alter our politics and outcomes.

Such a proportional representation system would not depend on the marginal vote in a constituency for gaining seats. The parties will get seats in the assembly and Lok Sabha in proportion to their votes in each state. Vote-buying will be redundant because a few more votes in a constituency at the cost of the overall party image will not be desperately important to survive. The parties can put up decent and worthy candidates who can enrich public life and be electoral assets—many such people can only be nominated to the Rajya Sabha now. The parties will also not be desperate to make unholy compromises for electoral survival. They can honestly seek vote on their vision and policies. The corrupt and cynical politicians will give way to the honest and competent leaders who share a broader vision for society. A class of leaders similar to our freedom-fighters will emerge from the younger generation to build a new India. More and more disenchanted voters and citizens will return to polling booths and participate. A democratic rejuvenation will take place.

In addition, if we also genuinely transfer power and resources to local governments, and build a robust, third tier of federalism, our democracy will mature. People will see the link between their vote and consequences in terms of public good. The person who is elected will start making a real difference. There will be greater transparency as the way taxes and resources are deployed will be visible. People will ensure that services improve. Authority will be fused with accountability, and there will be no alibis for non-performance—those who deliver will be empowered.

FPTP vs PR: Which Is Better?

Which countries follow the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system?

The US, UK, Canada, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Malawi and Zambia.

What's wrong with the FPTP system?

If there are only two choices (two parties or two candidates), FPTP can be a reasonable reflection of public will. But where there are multiple choices, the results are often skewed and distorted, and the elected house may not be truly representative.

Does it mean FPTP may result in minority governments?

In both the 2004 and 2009 general elections, the UPA secured less than 40 per cent of the votes polled. In other words, a majority of the voters—60 per cent and more—were not in favour of the UPA. But FPTP gave UPA a majority of seats.

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What's the relationship between voteshare and seats under FPTP?

A small change in voteshare may lead to a disproportionate increase or decrease in the number of seats won by a political party. The Samajwadi Party, for example, increased its voteshare in Uttar Pradesh from 25.43 per cent in 2007 to 29.15 per cent in the 2012 assembly election—an increase of 3.72 percentage points—but it won an additional 127 seats, an increase of 131 per cent. The Congress also increased its voteshare by 3.02 per cent in the state this time but gained only six additional seats.

Which countries follow the proportional representation system?

By far, the majority of the countries. Germany, France, Austria, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Russia and many other countries follow different variations of the PR system while some mix it with the FPTP system.

Why is the proportional representation system more useful?

Besides being a better and more representative reflection of popular will, the PR system will cut down on electoral expenses and reduce the use of both money and muscle power. Byelections too can be avoided.

Why are Indian political parties opposed to PR then?

Regional parties are apprehensive that proportional representation will reduce their strength in Parliament and therefore their political clout. National parties argue it will be more complicated, will lead to instability.

Does the Constitution allow for proportional representation?

Nothing in the Indian Constitution prescribes that we should have the first-past-the-post system. A suitable amendment in the Representation of People Act is all that is required. The Constitution merely mandates a government which is collectively responsible to Parliament and prescribes that members of the Lok Sabha be elected directly.

Fringe Players

Congress and BJP have negligible presence in the UP assembly. National parties reduced to insignificance.

Courtesy: [Outlook India](#)