

Democratic ambivalence

Modi, Trump and Bolsonaro are great election winners, but their stance on civil liberties is seen as questionable.

[Ashutosh Varshney](#) 05 Oct 2019

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Given what is happening in the US, Brazil and India — all producing stunning election victories in recent times — it is time to pay attention to the internal paradoxes of democracies.

Does democracy contain within itself the seeds of its own weakening? Does it have an inner adversary? These questions have long agitated the minds of political thinkers. Given what is happening in the US, Brazil and India — all producing stunning election victories in recent times — it is time to pay attention to the internal paradoxes of democracies.

A brief history of ideas would be in order. Some of the democratic questioning goes all the way back to the ancient city-states of Greece, but let us begin with the 1830s. That is when democracy, after its modern birth in the United States a few decades earlier, began its political spread in Europe. Franchise — or who could vote — was the big issue. By the 1830s,

the US had already granted the right to vote to all adult white males, amounting to nearly 40 per cent of the population. With franchise at 18 per cent, Britain was considerably behind. In the 1860s, when Britain debated whether franchise should be extended, John Stuart Mill, one of the most prominent British voices of the time and a father of modern liberalism, argued, "I regard it as wholly inadmissible that any person should participate in the suffrage without being able to read, write and, I will add, perform the common operations of arithmetic... Universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement."

India's debates, six to eight decades later, went against Mill. On how to think about democracy, the most decisive voice was [Jawaharlal Nehru's](#). Labelled as an incorrigible elitist in power circles today, Nehru, in fact, defended universal franchise on the premise that "each person should be treated as having equal political and social value". He did not trust the elite to understand and represent subaltern interests. Ambedkar held a similar view, and thus was born the idea that even though India was a mere 17-18 per cent literate in 1947, the poor and illiterate masses had the right to vote. Mill thought giving voting rights to the uneducated would undermine democracy; Nehru and Ambedkar believed the opposite. Disenfranchising the plebian voices would cripple democracy.

Though some polities, especially a few American states, continue to have severe voter registration requirements that effectively disenfranchise the poor, universal franchise is now a worldwide democratic norm. Modern democracy is inconceivable without elections.

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But one should briefly pause to consider an important objection to elections. Jean Jacques Rousseau, a great modern political thinker, argued that democracy is about regular, local-level, mass participation in decision-making, not periodic elections. It is also sometimes argued that contemporary China's view of democracy is Rousseauvian, emphasising

people's participation in local governments, not elections to select rulers in Beijing and provincial capitals.

However, few accept this principle today. "No elections, no democracy" is now a widely accepted dictum, as elections have become the incontestable foundation of political power in a democracy. There is no other way of figuring out who the people want as their rulers. Local participation is not a substitute for elections.

But is there more to democracy than elections? Modern democratic theory also asks: What does an elected government do while in power for four or five years? Especially important to democratic theory are three civil liberties: Freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of religious practice. How free are the citizens to speak? Are the people free to form non-governmental associations, not simply political parties? How are the religious groups, especially the minorities, treated? Without these freedoms, a democracy is only an electoral democracy. It is a deeper and more meaningful democracy, when such freedoms are not curbed. Elections are necessary, not sufficient.

Consider the implications of these larger arguments for India's democracy. Of the 17 national elections since 1952, only in 2014 and 2019 did the turnout exceed 65 per cent. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has won power in India's two most participatory elections. In an electoral sense, this is a truly massive achievement. Nehru won three elections in a row, but those were early days. The turnout was not as high. If Modi wins another high turnout election — let us say, in 2024 — his electoral record will undoubtedly eclipse Nehru's.

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Political analysts all over the world, therefore, understand the magnitude of Modi's electoral success. But they are also asking: How does his regime perform on civil liberties — on freedom of expression, religious practice and association? And is he, or his party, by any chance interpreting their electoral victory as a mandate to restrict civil freedoms? If so, then electoral democracy might well become the inner adversary of citizens' freedoms. It will be one dimension of democracy versus another, as the electoral triumph is allowed to ride roughshod over the democratically desirable freedoms.

The judgement of the world's leading organisations, assessing democracy worldwide, is worth considering. One of the largest such sources, rising in international stature and acclaim, is currently located at the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Not connected to any political or partisan organisation, the V-Dem Institute is entirely scholarly. It publishes the 'V-Dem Annual Democracy Report', which democracy scholars and activists await every year with great interest.

What did the annual report say about India last year? "In India, the infringements in media freedoms and civil society activities of democracy... following the election of a Hindu nationalist government have started to undermine the longest-standing and most populous democracy in the Global South. Yet the main indicators of core electoral aspects democracy do not show significant decline."

And what did the annual report proclaim this year? That "autocratisation" is increasing among "populous countries such as Brazil, India and the United States". By "autocratisation", the V-Dem report means decline of civil

liberties, including freedom for the media and civil society. Narendra Modi, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro are thus placed in the same category. They are great election winners, but their stance on civil freedoms is questionable.

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Should such scholarly assessments concern Modi, who has just won another election, placing him now electorally ahead of Trump and Bolsonaro? How is he interpreting his enhanced electoral mandate? Would civil freedoms be curbed on the argument that the elections have authorised such restrictions?

Those who did not vote for the [BJP](#) but are proud Indians, whose voices should matter in a democracy, as well as the world outside, await answers in the coming months.

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