

Voters Turnout- The Veins of Democracy

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Abstract

The true spirit of democracy are those hundreds and thousands of people who voice their opinion to declare what they require. The legitimacy of a democratic set up can be testified through the quantum of participation. For this analysis of voter's turnout becomes an essential. Voters turnout is not only the reflection of number of people who take part in the election process but it is also the reflection of people's faith on the existing political strata. Decreasing trend of voter's turnout is the chief concern worldwide. Apart from very few countries, all others have faced a big drop in their legitimate voters list. India serves as no exception. This research paper in its first section seeks to highlight the current status quo in this regard round the globe. In the next section it vividly portrays the determinants of voter's turnout. This paper concludes with certain notes of recommendation that can be followed to increase voter's turnout.

Keywords:

Voters Turnout; election, democracy; representative Government, public participation

Review of Literature

Indeed voters turnout is the mirror reflection of how legitimate the government or how reliable is the political stratum of the country. There are several factors that govern it; however no fixed determinant has been propounded so far. According to **Steven Rosen stone** and **John Mark Hansen**, "people participate in politics not so much because of who they are, but because of the political choices and incentives they are offered." They base this conclusion on an examination of data from national elections between 1952 and 1988. Restated, they believe that participation is explained by rational choice theory (RCT), which holds that people behave in whichever way best serves their own self-interest. A rational choice is, thus, the result of a calculation about the costs and benefits involved in the options presented in any given decision-making situation.

Not everyone agrees that rational choice theory can satisfactorily explain voter turnout. **Raymond Wolfinger**, for example, argues that RCT is "inherently unsuited to illuminating voter turnout. Although **Rosenstone and Hansen** and others believe that people vote principally because they seek personal benefits or rewards, **Wolfinger** points out that it just doesn't make sense to understand the act

of voting as a cost. Nor can one really say that all voters anticipate reaping the same rewards or benefits from the multiple ballot initiatives often found in California elections. Rational choice theory also fails to deal with the fact that most people cannot vote because they are not registered. And furthermore, RCT has not, in **Wolfinger's** view, properly explained variations in turnout from group to group, place to place, contest to contest, or election to election. Verba et al. are also skeptical about the usefulness of RCT in explaining or predicting voting behaviour. **Lijphart** points out is that turnout is not only low in the U.S., but also the world. He warns readers not to be deceived by facts that cite voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters. Those numbers are highly misleading and do not fully illustrate the problem. The turnout, the author says, is most frightening when looking at local or midterm elections. In the United States, off-year turnout is closer to 35 percent and local elections as low as 25 percent (**Lijphart, 1997**). Although less publicized, these second-order elections are certainly not irrelevant. It is not only the low numbers that alarms the author, but their decline. Once at an average of 60 to 65 percent in the 1950's, U.S. voter attendance has decreased to 50 to 55 percent in the 1990's

(**Lijphart, 1997**). **Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry** (1996) develop a theory in which relative, rather than absolute education determines political participation. Empirical tests of this theory have been unable to isolate the effect of education from other factors that impact participation. Differences in voter turnout among industrial democracies are a function of political institutions and

electoral law. Specifically, the presence of nationally competitive electoral districts provides incentives for parties and candidates to mobilize voters everywhere, thereby increasing turnout. Disproportionality in the translation of votes into legislative seats provides a disincentive to voting, which lowers turnout.

Introduction:

Democracy is the finest form of government that has flourished in its various forms across the world. From a one line definition propounded by Sir Abraham Lincoln to attainment of unending dimension, democracy has truly travelled a lot¹. There are various reasons why democracy is preferred over other form of government such as dictatorship or monarchy. The reason that tops the chart is the power to vote that is given to the citizens. This power is not merely a right but a tool that can alter the entire political scenario of a country. Right to vote or the concept of universal adult franchise owes its origin from the French revolution era. Today voting and mass participation has become the true spirit of democracy. The more is the participation the more efficient the democratic set up is believed to be. 'Voter turnout' is the apt term that can be closely associated to the type of participation that is required in democracy. How does a lexicon define 'Voter turnout'? Most popular websites define it as the percentage of eligible voters who cast votes in an election to elect their representative at various levels. Basically voter turnout provides us the idea of the

¹ Archibugi, Daniele, The Global Commonwealth of Citizens. Toward Cosmopolitan Democracy, Princeton University Press ISBN 978-0691134901

maisons; who undertake the responsibility of building a neat political framework of the country. The significance of voter turnout has been vividly recognised by many scholars and its constant decrease round the globe has been identified as a great set back to the global politics at large. After all it's the people for whose convenience a government is established, it is not only their right but an important responsibility to come ahead and voice their opinion (Though silently on a ballot paper.²)

It is a popular belief that a higher voter turnout is always desirable. It portrays the legitimacy of the existing system. A low turnout, on the other hand is accurate reflection of discontentment and disenchantment³. Low turnout not only is a symbol of existence of undesired parties but it also makes the entire system vulnerable to unequal representation.

In short, low voter turnout is an assault on the democracy. Democracy is about the people and not about the handful of people who vote. The problem has taken a very serious form. Before understanding what the solutions are to pull 'voter turnout' from the deep trench it is heading towards, it is essential to realise how much the world is affected by it and what are the basic reasons of low voter turnout. The next section discusses about the existence of this deficiency around the world and

highlights the countries who have taken a lead in achieving a high voter turnout⁴.

Status Quo Round the Globe:

The decreasing voter turnout is not restricted to our country India, even the best of countries who boast about their excellent political strata have faced similar downfall as faced by India. However, there are few that almost remain unaffected by this draconian trend. Few countries like Malta and Australia have maintained their voter turnout. In the lower house election they had turnout as high as 95%. Not far behind, there are countries like Chile, Austria and Belgium who stats closely vary from 93% to 91% to somewhat near to 90% respectively. These countries are very stable especially when it comes to their political structure, As a result of which they have a comparatively less speckled government-citizen relationship. Since the government that comes in power is due to the vote casted by maximum number of citizens, thus leaving less or in some cases no room for turbulence. Since most of the elected leaders have policies that are guided by the souls of the people who elected them. The case is not this tidy in every other country. There are countries such as UK, Portugal, and Finland that has witnessed not much up and down in the voter turnout graph, testifying the constant voter behaviour within the country. A constant voter turnout doesn't indicate any danger; however there always lies a probability of the stats sliding downwards

² Franklin, Mark N. "Electoral Engineering and Cross National Turnout Differences." British Journal of Political Science. 1999

³ Voter Turnout". Election Guide. International Foundation for Electoral Systems. <http://www.electionguide.org/voter-turnout.php>. Retrieved 2008-06-24. "...Election Guide is the most comprehensive and timely source of verified election information and results available online

⁴ "Voter Turnout". Fair Vote. Voting and Democracy Research Center. <http://www.fairvote.org/?page=262>. Retrieved 2008-06-24.

that might disrupt the concrete situation⁵. There are countries that cannot boast of its voter turnout and India, unfortunately joins that crowd. Indian politics has witnessed very low participation from the ab initio. Switzerland at close 50% lies at par with India. The foundation of democracy in such countries, perhaps has not been laid down in the manner it should have in. There are several factors that affect voter turnout in such countries. Some of the factors have been analyzed in the next section⁶.

Factors affecting Voters Turnout:

- **Socio economic factors:**

Regardless of the fact that everyone is aware of their right to vote, there always exist certain sect of people who would be more enthusiastic about their voting rights than others. One such demarcation can be set up on the basis of Education. A person who is educated would certainly know that Right to vote is not merely a tana bana of something unimportant, rather would acknowledge and appreciate it as a tool to change the face of politics of the country. They would recognise it as a tool for upliftment, unlike an uneducated person, voting for whom till date remains an obligation or to maximum a

mode acquire benefits the political leaders promise them⁷.

Other socio-economic factors include parameters such as Income and class. A person belonging to an affluent family is believed to be more active about his right and duty as compared to a person belonging to the lower middle class⁸. The United Nations Human Development Index shows some correlation between higher standards of living and higher turnout. Factors that can be further taken into consideration are: Demographic factors (young people are far less likely to vote than the elderly; and single people are less likely to vote than those who are married), Occupation (government employees vote more than private firm employees) etc.

- **Transparency:** One of the major factor that affects voter turnout is Transparency. A voter before registering himself as a voter asks himself several questions such as whether the government and the vote casting process trust worthy. Whether my vote is going to make any difference? What is the degree of partisanship among the population? Can the efficacy of voting be trusted? If he gets a positive response to each of these

⁵ Norris, Pippa. Elections and Voting Behaviour: New Challenges, New Perspectives. Alders hot: Ashgate, Dartmouth, 1998.

⁶ Philip Lampi (2008-05-29). "A New Nation Votes: American Elections Returns 1787–1825". Digital Collections and Archives. Tufts University. http://elections.lib.tufts.edu/aas_portal/index.xq

⁷ "Voter Turnout". Fair Vote. Voting and Democracy Research Center. <http://www.fairvote.org/?page=262>. Retrieved 2008-06-24

⁸ "Voter Turnout". International IDEA website. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 2008-06-16

he proceeds to take up this decision.

- **I vote, coz my dad does (Hereditary factors):**

An independent study shows that even the hereditary factors are parameters in question to determine the voter's turnout. Parental turnout is such a strong predictor of voting in their offspring. A person whose parents were active about their rights are noticed to have been equally active about such activities compared to others who barely took interest in improvisation of democratic set up in the country. It is an established fact that people inherit genes, and their behaviour at large remains similar.

- **Legislative framework:** It is a very well established fact that Institutional and legislative factors have a noteworthy impact on voter turnout. Rules and laws are also generally easier to change than attitudes, so much of the work done on how to improve voter turnout looks at these factors. For example; Making voting compulsory has a direct and dramatic effect on turnout. A step as simple as easy nomination rules, easy way to cast votes etc. Can affect voter's turnout for positives whereas unwarranted barriers might retard the voter's turnout. The modalities of how electoral registration is conducted can also affect turnout. One of the strongest factors affecting voter turnout is whether voting is compulsory. In Australia, voter registration and

attendance at a polling booth have been mandatory since the 1920s. This is one of the reasons why Australia has been able to keep itself on the top of the charts⁹.

- **Miscellaneous Reasons:**

- I. *Process of registration:* The difficulty level of the process of registration is directly proportional to the Voters turnout. Easier the process of registration, higher is the voters turnout and vice versa.
- II. *Process of Voting:* An analogous principle can be witnessed in this case as well, as in the case of the registration process. The difficulty in the voting process retards the voter's turnout.
- III. *Voter suppression:* Such an act demoralizes the citizens and forces them to abstain from voting for several security reasons. The voters in some countries are threatened by certain sets of people so that they don't cast their votes. This process is a big boulder in achieving a high voter's turnout.
- IV. *Work pressure:* people those who are involved in jobs that require a lot of extensive effort tend to loose interest in the countries politics. They forget where there country is heading towards; owing to the fact that

⁹ Michael McDonald (2008-04-01). "Voter Turnout". United States Elections Project. http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm. Retrieved 2008-06-24.

they remain too perturbed to sustain in the competitive environment. Their race for success in their field has extracted all their vitality towards the country's politics.

- V. *Limited options*: One of the reasons why people do not want to waste their vote is because at times they have to select their representative from the basket of filth. It is like selecting a lesser corrupt from the set of all corrupt people. They prefer reserving their votes rather than electing someone whom they don't want to but they have to.

Recommendations:

- *Reason to vote*: Anything that happens happens for a reason. If a person gets to know the reason as to why he is undertaking that work he would do it in a more efficient manner. This might seem to be a very basic technique but it's more than a drop to the ocean. Give the voters a reason to vote, explain them why it is so important. Explain the power they get with this right. This would revolutionize their mind and they would vote at large thus increasing the voters turnout. Their soul would be the driving force to cast votes, they would not require any extrinsic motivation as such. When voters believe key issues are at stake, they want a say in the outcome. High competition levels also help voters feel like their vote can actually make a difference. Competition often leads to higher levels of voter education, mobilization and media coverage, all of which further enable and encourage civic participation and turnout.
- *Each one teach one*: Education is the key to almost all socio economic problems. An educated person would recognise his right and understand its significance. He would not lose the opportunity of giving their country an appropriate structure. Education would broaden their minds and enlighten them as to why and how should they exercise this power. It has been proven through an independent study that an educated person is more inclined towards giving the society a shape that can happen only if people actively take part in elections procedure. Education acts as a morning tea that wakes up everyone from their deep slumbers. It's time to wake up. If everyone takes up the initiation of teaching someone around, someone who is underprivileged this would lead to the formation of an educated society; something that is the need of the hour.
- *Simplifying registration technique*: It is a well known fact that a person avoids situation that gives him/her a hard time. This is the fundamental nature of human that they tend to get inclined towards ways and paths that are relatively easier. Against this inherent character if a complex voter's registration process is used,

this would drop the slope of the voters currently voting. Everyone has a deep down passion to contribute towards the betterment of the country but no one would like to go so much out of the way to get them registered as voters. A simplified and easy to understand voting registration technique would suffice the need. People would not even shy away from the responsibilities and on the other hand they would fulfil all their obligations within their comfort zone. Rigidity diminishes interest; and this is what has to be the guiding principle while developing such procedures. For example In 2008, more than eight million eligible and interested voters did not or could not vote due to outmoded voting practices, avoidable errors or confusing procedures that vary in all 50 states of USA.

- *Easy voting techniques:* As earlier stated it is the inherent trait of every human being to stay in their cocoon; their comfort zone. This is one reason why several people prefer staying at home rather than getting into long queues to cast their votes. There have been sincere efforts by the government to tackle voters fatigue however a lot more in this regard has to be done. Government needs to explore its creative side and come up with easy yet reliable technique of voting. Online voting is one of the dark horses. Serious debate is going on this technique as well; but no clear signals of its

implementation in the near future are expected. No matter what, the government has to make the entire voting process simple and less tedious. Definitely a click is more desirable than long queues. We can move ahead with a simple advice that certain experimentation is required in evolving an easy technique however the legitimacy of the same should be tested it shouldn't allow someone to take undue advantage of the technology. A popular website quoted 'In USA Several million votes are lost in every major election due to poor election administration that results from underinvestment, low standards, and partisan interference in the election process. Well-documented problems with equipment, poll worker hiring and training, and lines also contribute to ballot losses.'

- *Planning elections on suitable days:* There are several parameters that has to be taken in consideration before an election day is declared. A day with if not pleasant at least soothing weather would be more desirable. This would save our countrymen from the tortures of their extreme climate. Another factor that has to be taken in consideration is the Election Day should not be near some festival or some red letter day, this would lead to low participation. A person would never like to waste his entire day for casting votes on such occasion and thereby leading to drop in the voter's turnout graph. Such factors

though look trivial however may affect the voters turnout to a great degree.

- *Voter mobilization:* ‘Voter mobilization is a critical turnout factor, inevitably tied to the level of competition in an election and issues at stake. It is also inevitably impacted by election barriers and voter confidence in the voting process, or by who is doing the mobilizing and the amount and type of messengers involved. With a competitive race and more choices for voters, mobilization can make a big difference. Voter mobilization brings excitement and urgency. It breaks down barriers and raises the stakes. It gives voters a stronger incentive to find their poll on a busy day and helps them with the information and logistics (e.g. a ride to the polls) needed to vote. Voter mobilization is a broad category of activity. It can take many forms, from the partisan to the nonpartisan. Mobilization can take place anywhere – where people live, work, learn, get services, socialize or seek information – and can include education on the issues, the candidates, or the how, where and when of voting.’ Quotes a popular website.
- *Playing with the psychology:* This is something which is very innovative yet very basic. An easy game that can lead to a very high voter’s turnout. Someone who has been personally contacted, especially by someone they know, is more likely to vote than someone

who has not. Human psychology has is no match to pragmatism or reasoning. Those who grow up around family members who vote and discuss politics frequently are more likely to vote themselves. Simply talking about current events with friends and relatives can generate interest in the political process and encourage someone to vote. The influence of family, friends and trusted organizations are particularly important to first-time voters. A Harvard University poll said 61% of first-time voters polled in 2004 cited the importance of families and organizations in voting. .

- *Ensuring fair elections:* People are less likely to vote if they don't believe that their vote will be counted, or if they don't trust the government. A loss of faith in the electoral process leads to a belief that a person's vote doesn't really matter. Accountable elections and a responsive government help to ensure that voters stay engaged in the process. Beyond Turnout – Why Is Competition Important "The benefits of competitive elections include a better informed electorate, stronger parties and political organizations? It is a sense of legitimacy by providing voters the chance to re-elect or replace an incumbent and responsiveness of overall legislative outcomes to the public mood. It for these reasons that noted political scientists and others specifically list competitive elections as one necessary

condition of democracy." Dr. Michael McDonald,

- *Role of media:* Media projections have a statistically significant and negative effect on voter turnout. Although the coefficient is small, our model indicates that a sufficiently early projection can result in a substantial decrease in voter turnout. This alone has considerable ramifications upon the presidential election process. Namely, one could argue that media projections essentially rob a portion of the electorate from the feeling of making a civic contribution, and discourage them from participating in a central democratic process.
- *Compulsory voting:* Opponents of the law complain that voters affected will be more politically liberal and in turn seek to enlarge the size and scope of the government. In order to determine whether this is true, a test was run on the effect compulsory voting. However this is one way (though rigid) that can work wonders in this regard

Conclusion:

Elections aren't decided by how many people agree with a candidate; they are decided by how many people actually show up and vote for him. This is the all-important "voter turnout" statistic. As discussed in length voter's turnout portrays the true dimensions of a country's democracy. A high voter's turnout, especially in countries like India would be like a dream come true. We would be able to achieve the

type of nation our freedom fighters yearned for. A stable political stratum can be achieved only if majority of people make their vote count, more importantly cast their vote. A high voter's turnout would certainly lead to establishment of a perfect nation. That is what we aspire for. With sets of recommendations mentioned in the above paragraphs, a high voter's turnout can be easily achieved. And the day we are able to achieve a high voter's turnout; we'll be able to give a new face to not only Indian but to global politics.