

Elections are a major institutional pillar politics essay



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Elections are a major institutional pillar of liberal democracy. They are the 'dominant element' of political process as they provide the platform for exercising the basic rights of the people associated with democracy - freedom of speech, association, choice and movement and the like. They also form the individual's rights of participation in the political process. For the masses they are the opportunity to make the political leaders accountable for their stewardship during the time they were in power, as well as subject to their power as the final sovereign of the country. An election is a competition for office based on a formal expression of preferences by a designated body of people at the ballot box.[1]As Yogesh Atal had observed, "elections computes public opinion." [2]Therefore, elections signify the power of the people and provide legitimacy to the authority of the government. On the importance of elections, Norman D. Palmer, has observed:

Elections are particularly conspicuous and revealing aspect of most contemporary political systems. They highlight and dramatize a Political System, bringing its nature into sharp relief, and providing insights into other aspects of the system as a whole... [3]

Popular elections are at the heart of representative democracy. And, that holding periodic election is the hallmark of representative democracy based on the active interest of the people. The functioning of democracy demands "maximum involvement and participation of the masses in democratic process of the country." [4]These are "the central democratic procedure for selecting and controlling leaders." [5]Elections are episodes of political action during which the preferences of citizens and the conduct of politicians, based

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on their past agency record and their prospective promises, intersects and interact.[6]In the opinion of Robert A. Dahl, “ the election is the central technique for ensuring that government leaders will be relatively responsible to non-leaders.”[7]The political class sees elections as an opportunity for renewing their mandate to exercise legitimate power. In this sense, elections constitute a vital bridge linking the masses to the political class.[8]In addition, growing commitment to democratic elections is also an affirmation of a growing popular commitment to the rule of law.[9]Democracy, particularly, its liberal version, may be defined as “ a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realms of citizens, acting indirectly through competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.”[10]

In fact, elections in a democratic system of governance provide the voter with a meaningful choice of candidates, and are distinguished by several characteristics, including ‘ a universal franchise, a secret ballot, the involvement of political parties, contests in every, or almost every, constituency and campaigns regulated by strict and fair rules.’[11]This implies extensive competition for power; highly inclusive citizenship and extensive civil and political liberties. Also, in-between elections, citizens must be able to influence public policy through various non-electoral means like interest - group associations and social movements, which invariably involve cooperation and competition among citizens.[12]

The use of elections in the modern era dates to the emergence of representative government in Europe and North America since the 17th century.[13]Modern democracies are typically based on representative
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models in which citizens elect their representatives to govern and frame policies on their behalf. Full democracies are those systems in which there are universal suffrage, regular elections, an independent judiciary, relatively equal access to power for all groups, and extensive civil liberties that are combined with protection for minorities and disadvantaged groups.[14]

The developments and want for electoral democracy across societies are quite fascinating. Indeed, some twenty-five years ago there were only about thirty-five democracies across the world, most of them being wealthy and industrialized nations, particularly in the West. Today, the number has grown to about 120. Huntington (1999) argues that at least thirty countries turned democracies between 1974 and 1990;[15]while Diamond (1997) takes Freedom House data to show that that the number of democracies increased from 39 in 1974 to 118 in 1996.[16]Consequently, and more precisely, democratic government out-numbered all other governments. Jagers and Gurr (1995) claim that the proportions of the democracies rose from 27 percent in 1975 to 50 percent in 1994.[17]

It is assumed by critics that many of the new democracies are being “hollowed out.”[18]The effect is the spread of electoral democracy where political parties battle for control of government through comparatively free and fair election;[19]but not liberal democracy with an effective rule of law behind individual and minority freedoms and protections.[20]A claim to liberal democracy may serve to legitimize state authority nearly everywhere, but the reality falls far short of the global triumph of liberal democratic government. The remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy served as the premise of Fukuyama’s thesis on “the end of <https://assignbuster.com/elections-are-a-major-institutional-pillar-politics-essay/>

history.”[21]Doubts about the quality of new democracies imply that the new democracies may enshrine democratic principles that fail to operate in practice, and that the populations do not therefore enjoy liberal democratic freedoms.

Defining “electoral politics”

Though psephologist and scholars often make use of the term ‘electoral politics,’ the phrase is, very rarely defined accurately. Still, as term in common political discourse goes, this is, in particular, not vague or elastic. The definition that follows is partly descriptive; that is to say, it is designed to reflect what most people seem to mean when they use the term and to suggest what the term ought to.

The word ‘election’ is of Latin origin and is derived from the root ‘eligere.’ ‘Election’ literary connotes, ‘the public choice of person for office.’ It may be regarded as “a form of procedure recognized by the rules of an organization, whereby all or some of the members of the organization choose a smaller number of persons or one person to hold office of authority in the organization.”[22]According to Webster’s dictionary, election means “the act or process of choosing a person for an office, position or membership by voting.”

An election, as William B. Munro (1926) writes long ago, “consists of a regular series of events.”[23]These events differ from political system to another as provided by the respective legal provisions of that particular system, but always include voter registration, nominations of candidates, seeking access to the electorate, voter’s preferences and the like. It is a

formal act of collective decision that occurs in a stream of connected antecedent and subsequent behaviour.[24] Elections are the principal mechanism by which the citizens hold government accountable, both retrospectively for their policies and more generally for the manner in which they govern.[25] Hence, it can be said that electoral politics is the study of the political process, involved in the electoral process, ranging from the nomination of candidates to the final outcome of an election and can be conceptualized as a set of activities, in strategic cooperation between numerous participants in the electoral process. This naturally involves the study of campaign strategies (the electoral behaviour), and the mobilisation of resources by political parties and the candidates; the role of youth power, organised groups and influentials.

In simple terms, 'electoral politics' is s "an index of popular consciousness, articulation and participation of the electorate in the decision"[26] of the society. Electoral politics seeks to analyze the major features in the conduct of elections, democratic or otherwise, and the process involved therein to ascertain electorate opinion of a given geographical area. It is through election that political preferences of the electors are expressed and ordered. The process of electoral politics presents the electors with a decision task that requires a particular choice between the contending candidates. Thus it may be said that electoral politics, "is a means of translating the popular will into an elected assembly." [27] But at the same time it must be conceded that elections are "clumsy instruments of choice." [28] In such circumstances, the study of election and electoral system has been "a continuing source of

interdisciplinary conflict, largely between political scientists and sociologists.”[29]

The Review of Literature:

There is considerable body of theoretical and empirical literature on elections and its allied discipline, in both the developed and developing democracies, that identifies several functions performed by elections in liberal democracies. A brief history of the literature available so far is examined in the pages that follow:

Scholarly studies of electoral politics have a long and vibrant history. Most works on electoral politics primarily focus on voting behavior. The 1940s saw the birth of scientific use of survey research to examine academic voting research in the study of electoral politics. Under the direction of Paul Lazarsfeld, the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University interviewed a probability sample of Erie County, Ohio, during the Roosevelt-Wilkie presidential race.[30]The findings of the study were published in the book titled “ The People Choice.”[31]The authors determine why people vote as they do focusing mainly on social groupings, religion, and residence. They argue that people tend to vote with their groups, and to that extent people take longer time to arrive at voting choice. Later, a second panel study conducted by the Columbian School in 1948 provided a more influential book, “ Voting.”[32]It examines the factors that make people vote the way they do based on the famous Elmira Study, carried out by a team of skilled social scientists during the 1948 presidential campaign. It shows how voting is affected by social class, religious background, family loyalties, local pressure groups, mass communication media, and other factors.

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The work of Lazarsfeld and his Columbia colleagues demonstrated the rich potential of election surveys as data for understanding campaigns and elections. The next, and even more important, advance in election studies emerged in the following decade at the University of Michigan.[33]It created the most significant milestone in the whole tenet of electoral research, “ The American Voter.”[34]It explored the so-called “ psychological model,” in its study explaining people’s political choices; and found out how people voted were mainly their party identification. The work established a baseline for most of the scholarly debate that has followed in the decades since.

[35]However, political scientist like V. O. Key[36]attacked this work, in which he famously asserted, “ voters are not fools.” Key argues against the implications of Campbell et al.’s book, and Converse’s later addition, [37]about the ignorance and unreliability of American voters. He analyzed public opinion data and electoral returns to show what he believed to be the rationality of voters’ choices as political decisions rather than responses to psychological stimuli.[38]

In the years that followed, Nie, Verba, & Petrocik[39]presents one of the best treatments on the subject in the form of “ The Changing American Voter.” It analyzes and evaluates the changes which have taken place since the publication of “ The American Voter.” The resultant is that electorate has both responded and contributed to the major political shifts of the 60s and 70s; it depicts how and why by citing substantial statistics and figures. However, this argument finds many critics. Among them, Smith[40]posits a more bleak political landscape in which the typical voter knows little about politics is not interested in the political arena and consequently does not

participate in it. To support this view, Smith demonstrates how the indices used by Nie, Verba, and Petrocik during the 1960s were methodologically flawed and how a closer examination of supposed changes reveals only superficial and unimportant shifts in the ways voters have approached the ballot box since the 1950s.

Miller and Shanks[41]in their study, presents a comprehensive analysis of American voting patterns from 1952 through the early 1990s, with special emphasis on the 1992 election, based on data collected by the National Election Studies. It also presents a unique social and economic picture of partisanship and participation in the American electoral process. Michael S. Lewis-Beck[42]re-creates the outstanding 1960 classic, *The American Voter*, by following the same format, theory, and mode of analysis as the original in the form of “ *The American Voter Revisited.*” It discovers that voting behaviour has been remarkably consistent over the last half century and quite surprisingly, the contemporary American voter is found to behave politically much like voters of the 1950s.

Across the Atlantic, the study of electoral behaviour was no less momentous. A number of scholars and researcher, alike took up the topic in academic research till date. Butler and Stokes[43]offer an explanation of British voting behaviour since 1945 with greater emphasis on sociological and historical factors and on changes at the macro and elite level. Harrison[44]provide a detailed explanation of how the British political system came to acquire the form it has today by analysing topics such as civil liberties, pressure groups, parliament, elections and the parties, central and local government, cabinet, and monarchy. Birch[45]provides a comprehensive account of British

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political institutions, of the way in which they operate, and of the society in which they developed. Pugh[46]present an insightful survey of changes in British politics since the election of 1945 and examines Labour Party's evolution into a national rather than sectional party. David Powell[47]examine British politics on the eve of war, the author assesses the impact of war on the parties and the political system and the process of realignment that followed in the interwar period. Hough and Jeffery[48]present a comparative perspective on the new dynamics of electoral competition following devolution to Scotland and Wales. It brings together leading experts on elections, political parties and regional politics from Britain, Europe and North America to explore the dynamics and interactions of national and regional arenas of electoral competition. Johnston and Pattie[49]analyses the dynamics of electoral behaviour into its geographical context. They show how voters and parties are affected by, and in turn influence, both national and local forces.

Kavanagh[50]analyse the methods of political choice and decision-making in electoral democratic institutions. The focus throughout is on key topics of voting behavior, election rules, the media, election pacts, and the consequences of elections. Wolfinger and Rosenstone[51]present an assessment of the sociological, motivational, and political factors that account for variation in electoral participation. Lupia and Harrop and Miller[52]examine competitive electoral systems as well as non-competitive ones. McCubbins[53]present an impressive treatment of one of the most important issues in democratic theory: the individual's inability to make fully informed decisions. It redefines the research agenda in democratic theory

and information and also intends to lay foundations of a new theoretical approach to institutional design

Bendor, Diermeier, Siegel and Ting[54]provides a behavioral theory of elections based on the notion that all actors, that is, both politicians as well as voters are only bounded rationally. The theory constructs formal models of party competition, turnout, and voters' choices of candidates and the like. These models predict substantial turnout levels, voters sorting into parties, and winning parties adopting centrist platforms. Bogdanor & Butler[55]analyses the main electoral systems of modern democracies, and places them in their institutional and historical context.

Diamond and Plattner[56]addresses electoral systems and democracy comparing the experiences of diverse countries, from Latin America to southern Africa, from Uruguay, Japan, and Taiwan to Israel, Afghanistan, and Iraq. As the number of democracies has increased around the world, a heated debate has emerged among experts about which system best promotes the consolidation of democracy. Diamond[57]sets forth a distinctive theoretical perspective on democratic evolution and consolidation in the late twentieth century. These include strong political institutions, appropriate institutional designs, decentralization of power, a vibrant civil society, and improved economic and political performance.

Courtney[58]argues that elections are governed by accepted rules and procedures of the political system and it is important for citizens to understand their own electoral system. Sawyer[59]presents an edited volume on Australian electoral history providing a broad commentary on continuing

democratic challenges. Roberts[60]provides explanations and analysis of the German federal electoral system; discusses the role of electoral politics in relation to political parties and to the public.

Lindberg[61]studies elections as a core institution of liberal democracy in the context of newly democratizing countries. He gathers data from every nationally contested election in Africa from 1989 to 2003, covering 232 elections in 44 countries, argues that democratizing nations learn to become democratic through repeated democratic behavior, even if their elections are often flawed. Cowen & Laakso[62]presents electoral studies of multi-party politics in 14 African countries during the 1990s. Hesseling[63]offers theoretical and historical assessments of election observation and evaluates policies and their implementation in specific case studies. Diamond and Plattner[64]examines the state of progress of democracy in Africa at the end of the 1990s. The past decade's " third wave" of democratization, the contributors argue, has been characterized by retreats as well as advances. Piombo and Nijzik[65]in their edited work give an account of democratic elections in South Africa since April 1994 after her liberation.

Norris[66]analyses whether there are legitimate grounds for concern about public support for democracy world-wide; or are there political, economic, and cultural factors driving the dynamics of support for democratic government. It shows how citizens in contemporary democracies relate to their governments. Later on, Norris[67]focuses on " democratic deficits," reflecting how far the perceived democratic performance of any state diverges from public expectations

Popkin[68]concludes that voters make informed logical choices by analyzing three primary campaigns - Carter in 1976; Bush and Reagan in 1980; and Hart, Mondale, and Jackson in 1984 - to arrive at a new model of the way voters sort through commercials and sound bites to choose a candidate. Powell[69]argues that elections are instrumental in linking the preferences of citizens to the behaviour of policymakers His empirical findings prove that if this is taken as the main function of democratic elections ' the proportional vision and its designs enjoyed a clear advantage over their majoritarian counterparts in using elections as instruments of democracy.'[70]Brennan and Lomasky[71]offer a compelling challenge to the central premises of the prevailing theories of voting behavior. Niemi and Weiberg[72]present collection of essays that explore some of the controversies in the study and understanding of voting behavior. Caplan[73]takes a persistent look at how people who vote under the influence of false beliefs ultimately end up with government that delivers miserable results. LeDuc, Niemi and Norris[74]in their edited volume provide a broad theoretical and comparative understanding of all the key topics associated with the elections including electoral and party systems, voter choice and turnout, campaign communications, and the new politics of direct democracy. Zuckerman[75]in his edited volume uses classic theories to explain individuals' political decisions by a range of political scientists; advances theory and method in the study of political behavior and returns the social logic of politics to the heart of political science.

Cox[76]employs a unified game-theoretic model to study strategic coordination worldwide that relies primarily on constituency-level rather than

national aggregate data in testing theoretical propositions about the effects of electoral laws. Norris[77] gives a masterpiece of synthesis, original theorizing, and empirical analysis of an impressively large number and variety of cases. This book looks at public opinion data linking attitudes, party choices, and electoral systems in ways that the game theory literature usually fails to come to grips with. Norris combines institutional and survey data from 32 widely different countries to assess the possibilities and limitations of implanting democracy through institutional engineering. Franklin[78] demonstrate how voter turnout can serve as an indicator of the health of a democracy, and concludes that declining turnout does not necessarily reflect reductions in civic virtue or increases in alienation.

Dalton[79] introduces the reader to the knowledge we have of comparative political behavior, and the implications of these findings. The analyses focus on the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and France in a broad cross-national context. Dalton offers the theory that the “ quality” of citizen politics is alive and well whereas the institutions of democracy are in disarray. Further, Dalton[80] documents the erosion of political support in virtually all advanced industrial democracies. It traces the current challenges to democracy owing to changing citizen values and rising expectations. The author finds that these expectations are making governing more difficult, but also fueling demands for political reform.

Prysbly and Books[81] examines how and why individual political behavior can be influenced by various contextual characteristics of the locality in which the individual resides, an