
A Study of Elections in India: Scientific and Political Review

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ABSTRACT

Elections are a complex, multi-dimensional social and political event which can be captured only through a variety of methods: this literature review underlines how the different approaches complete each other and are therefore equally necessary. While Indian election studies, at least at the national and state levels, have been dominated, since the 1990s, by survey research, the Lokniti based project of 'Comparative Electoral Ethnography' should contribute to restoring some balance between various types of studies. Also, academic debates around the scientific and political implications and limitations of election studies seem to lead to a convergence: while questionnaire-based surveys evolve towards a finer apprehension of the opinions and attitudes of Indian voters, anthropological studies strive to overcome the limitations of fieldwork based on a single, limited area. Finally, at a time when election surveys have acquired an unprecedented visibility, due to their relationship with the mass media, one can only lament the absence of rigorous studies on the role of the media, both print and audio-visual, in funding, shaping and publicizing election studies.

Keywords: Elections, Political Science, India, Media, Democracy, Methodology

Politics in India take place within the framework of its constitution, as India is a federal parliamentary democratic republic, in which the President of India is the head of the country and the Prime Minister of India is the head of the government. India follows the dual polity system, i.e. a double government which consists of the central authority at the centre and states at the periphery. The constitution defines the organization powers and limitations of both central and state governments, and it is well-recognised, rigid and considered supreme; i.e. laws of the nation must conform to it. There is a provision for a bicameral Union legislature consisting of an Upper House, i.e. Rajya Sabha, which represents the states of the Indian federation and a lower house i.e. Lok Sabha, which represents the people of India as a whole. The Indian constitution provides for an independent Judiciary which is headed by the Supreme Court. The court's mandate is to protect the constitution, to settle disputes between the central government and the states, inter-state disputes, to nullify any central or state laws that go against the constitution and protect fundamental rights of citizens, issuing writs or their enforcement, in case of violation.

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The governments, union or state, are formed through elections held every five years (unless otherwise specified), by parties that claim a majority of members in their respective lower houses (Lok Sabha in centre and Vidhan Sabha in states). India had its first general election in 1951, which was won by the Indian National Congress, a political party that went on to dominate the successive elections up until 1977, when the first non-Congress government was formed for the first time in independent India. The 1990s saw the end of single party domination and rise of coalition governments. The elections for the 17th Lok Sabha, held from April 2014 to May 2014, once again brought back single-party rule in the country, with the Bharatiya Janata Party being able to claim a majority in the Lok Sabha.

In recent decades, Indian politics has become a dynastic affair. The reasons for this state of affair could be the absence of a party organization, independent civil society associations that mobilize support for the party, and centralized financing of elections.

THE STUDY OF INDIAN ELECTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

At least three previous reviews of election studies have been realized, by Narain (1978), Brass (1985), and Kondo (2007). Both Narain and Kondo provide a fairly exhaustive list of publications in this field, and discuss their relevance and quality. Brass' review also offers a detailed discussion of the advantages and limitations of ecological approaches, to which I will later return.

There is no need to repeat this exercise here. But in view of situating the debates described in the next section of the paper, I simply want to sketch a broad typology of election studies published since the late 1980s—a moment which can be considered as the emergence of the new configuration of the Indian political scene, characterized by (i) the importance of regional parties and regional politics; (ii) the formation of ruling coalitions at the national and regional levels; and (iii) the polarization of national politics around the Congress, the BJP, and the 'third space'.

All three reviews of the literature highlight the diversity of disciplines, methods, authors, institutions, and publication support of studies of Indian elections. But a major dividing line appears today between case studies and survey research (which largely match a distinction between qualitative and quantitative studies), with a number of publications, however, combining elements of both.

OTHER APPROACHES

A number of articles and books on Indian elections combine different methodological approaches. Thus some of Banerjee's conclusions are shared by the political scientists Ahuja and Chibber (n.d.), in an interesting study combining quantitative and qualitative methods (i.e. election surveys (1989-2004) and a series of focus group discussions) in three large Indian states. In order to understand the particular pattern of electoral turnout described by Yadav as characteristic of the 'second democratic upsurge' (Yadav 2000), Ahuja and Chibber identify three broad social groups, defined by three distinct 'interpretations' of voting. They argue that 'differences in the voting patterns of opposite ends of the social spectrum exist because each group interprets the act of voting differently'. Thus the act of voting is considered as a 'right' by the groups who are on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum—the 'marginalized'; as an 'instrument [...] to gain access to the state and its resources' by those in the middle of that

spectrum—the ‘State’s clients’; and as ‘civic duty’ by those at the top—‘the elite’ (Ahuja & Chibber 2009: 1-9). Among the ‘other approaches’ of elections, one also finds a number of monographs devoted to a single election. For instance Myron Weiner’s study of the 1977 election constitutes an interesting, contemporary account of the beginning of the end of Congress dominance over Indian politics, with the first part devoted to the campaign and the second part to the analysis of results, on the basis on a medley of methods typical of political science:

In four widely scattered cities – Bombay, Calcutta, Hyderabad, and New Delhi—[the author] talked to civil servants, candidates, campaign workers, newspaper editors, and people in the streets, attended campaign rallies and visited ward offices, collected campaign literature, listened to the radio, and followed the local press (Weiner 1978: 21)

In the 1990, a series of collective volume were published on parliamentary elections (for instance Roy & Wallace 1999). Often based on aggregate data such as those published by the Election Commission of India, they offer a series of papers that are interpretative, speculative, critical in nature. The renaissance, so to speak, of electoral surveys, came from another academic turned journalist: Prannoy Roy. An economist by training, Roy learnt survey research in the United Kingdom. After coming back to India in the early 1980s, he applied this method to Indian elections. He co-produced a series of volumes, with Butler and Lahiri, he conducted a series of all India opinion polls for the magazine India Today, but more importantly in 1998 he founded a new television channel, New Delhi Television (NDTV) on which he anchored shows devoted to the statistical analysis of elections—thus popularizing psephology. The link between these two pioneering institutions of psephology, CSDS and NDTV, was provided by Yogendra Yadav, a young political scientist who was brought from Chandigarh University to the CSDS by Rajni Kothari. Yadav revived the data unit of the CSDS and went on to supervise an uninterrupted series of electoral studies which have been financially supported and publicized by the print media, but also by NDTV. Yadav’s expertise, his great ability to explain psephological analyses both in English and Hindi, made him a star of TV shows devoted to elections, first on NDTV, and then on the channel co-founded by the star anchor Rajdeep Sardesai after he left NDTV: CNN-IBN. In 1995, the CSDS team around Yogendra Yadav created Lokniti, a network of scholars based in the various Indian states, working on democracy in general and on elections in particular. The Lokniti network has been expanding both in sheer numbers and in terms of disciplines, and it has consistently observed elections since 1996.

POLITICAL ISSUES

One can distinguish three types of relationship between elections studies and politics, which correspond to three distinct, if related, questions. Firstly, how do elections studies meet the need of political actors? Secondly, to what extent are they an offshoot of American political science? And thirdly, what representation of democracy do they support?

Firstly, the development of survey research is directly linked to Indian political life: In the 1950s there were virtually no market research organizations in India. The dominance of the Congress diminished any incentive to develop political polls (Butler *et al.* 1995: 41).

At the time of the second non-Congress government at the Centre (1989-1991), political parties started commissioning surveys which they used to build their electoral strategy (Rao 2009).

Indian elections have been decided at the state level since the 1990s, and the proliferation of national pre-poll survey from the 1991 election onwards can be linked to the uncertainty of the electoral results in a context of increasing assertion of regional parties (Rao 2009). The fact that the CSDS resumed its elections series in 1996 is doubtlessly linked to the transformations that have been characterizing the Indian political scene since the beginning of that decade. The rise to power of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh and its emergence in other North Indian states, and more generally the fragmentation of political representation, with new parties representing increasingly smaller social groups, has made it increasingly necessary to know who votes for which party in which state—and why.

Furthermore the decentralization policy adopted in 1992 has generated a lot of interest both from actors and observers of Indian politics. Today the newfound interest for ethnographic, locally rooted types of election studies may well have to do with the fact that the national scale is increasingly challenged as the most relevant one to understand Indian politics.

Secondly, a more covert, but no less important aspect of the debate relates to what could be roughly called the ‘Western domination’ of survey research. Methods have been learnt by leading Indian figures in the United States or in the United Kingdom (even in the 2000s, CSDS members get trained in the summer school in survey research in Michigan University). Authors are often American (or working in the American academia). Funding often involves foreign funding agencies.

More importantly, the key concepts of survey research are often drawn from the rich field of American election studies, and particularly from behaviourism, a school of thought which is rejected by part of the Indian academia. Lastly, the general (and often implicit) reference to which the Indian scenario is compared is actually the United States and Western Europe. On the one hand, these comparative efforts testify to the fact that India is not an outsider any more as far as democracies are concerned. On the other hand, one can regret an excessive focus, in comparisons, on the West, insofar as it skews the assessment of the Indian case (for instance the Indian pattern of voter turnout, which is qualified as ‘exceptional’ by Yadav because it breaks from the trend observed in North America and Western Europe, might appear less so if it was compared, say, to post-Apartheid South Africa).

Thirdly, all election studies support a (more or less implicit) discourse on Indian democracy; they can always be read as a ‘state of democracy report’ (Jayal 2006). In this regard, one of the criticisms addressed to psephological studies is that their narrow focus tends to convey a rosy picture, since elections are usually considered as ‘free and fair’ in the Indian democracy, which is often qualified as ‘procedural’, i.e. which conforms to democratic procedures (regular elections and political alternance, a free press) but not to democratic values (starting with equality). The sheer magnitude of the logistics involved in conducting national elections is bound to evoke admiring appraisals, which tend to obliterate the limits of procedural democracy. Thus Jayal criticizes the ‘the fallacy of electoralism’:

The scholars who subscribe to the limited, proceduralist view of democracy, are generally buoyant about Indian democracy... Their analyses emphatically exclude the many social and

economic inequalities that make it difficult for even formal participation to be effective (Jayal 2001: 3).

Moreover the huge costs involved in conducting sample surveys on ever larger samples imply that the funders—which include the media—can put pressure on the team conducting the survey. And one can see two reasons why survey research is so media friendly: one, its (supposed) ability to predict results makes it an indispensable component of the horse-race, entertaining aspect of elections; two, it contributes to the ‘feel good’ factor as it shows, election after election, that the turnout is high and that results are unpredictable; it thus gives credit to the idea of democratic choice.

To this positive assessment, some Indian political scientists oppose the more critical vision offered by case studies of Indian politics focusing not on the mainstream, but on the margins. Here anthropology offers a way out, since the informed perspective of the long time fieldworker allows a simultaneous perception of the mainstream and of the margins. Thus the works of Hauser and Singer or that of Banerjee, offering a minute description of the various ‘ceremonies’ that together constitute the election process from the vantage point of voters, highlight both the empowering and the coercive dimensions of voting. Their studies suggest that when it comes to elections, the relationship between celebration and alienation is a very subtle one.

CONCLUSION

Elections are a complex, multi-dimensional social and political event which can be captured only through a variety of methods: this literature review underlines how the different approaches complete each other and are therefore equally necessary. While Indian election studies, at least at the national and state levels, have been dominated, since the 1990s, by survey research, the Lokniti based project of ‘Comparative Electoral Ethnography’ should contribute to restoring some balance between various types of studies. Also, academic debates around the scientific and political implications and limitations of election studies seem to lead to a convergence: while questionnaire-based surveys evolve towards a finer apprehension of the opinions and attitudes of Indian voters, anthropological studies strive to overcome the limitations of fieldwork based on a single, limited area. Finally, at a time when election surveys have acquired an unprecedented visibility, due to their relationship with the mass media, one can only lament the absence of rigorous studies on the role of the media, both print and audio-visual, in funding, shaping and publicizing election studies.

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Conflict of Interest

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