2019 ELECTION VOTER TURN OUT: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE VOTER TURN OUT OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST ELECTORAL PROCESS

Nooran Ahluwalia

The British School, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Voters form the bedrock of any democratic nation. Their power is reflected in a country's reliance on elections to shape its future. However, the electoral process can never be at its optimum efficiency if the voting body does not stand for views and opinions of the entirety of a country's population. Through the backdrop of the 2019 General Elections in India, this paper aims to decipher the reasons as to why the voter turn-out, specifically in India, is not at its best possible number. The paper finally poses basic policy recommendations for the Election Commission in India to ensure the maximum number of women and men are given an opportunity to cast their vote and thus, strengthen the democratic pillars of their nation.

Keywords: Elections, Voter Turn-Out, India, Voter ID Cards, Election Commission
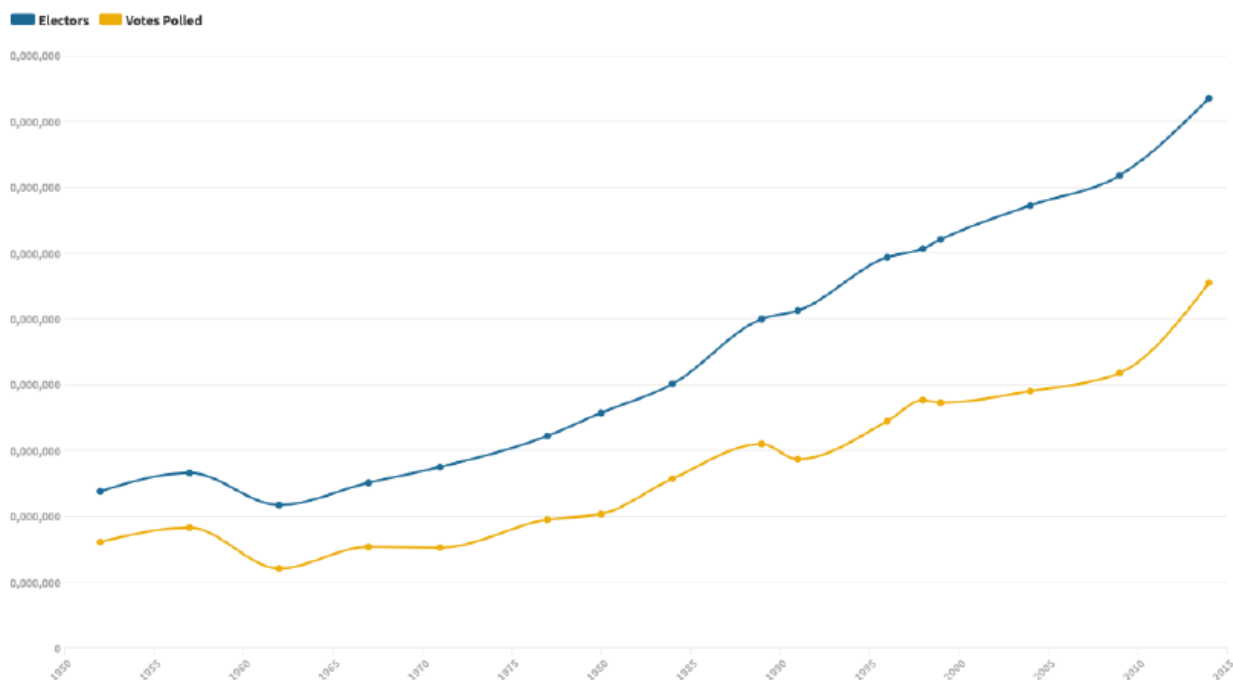
INTRODUCTION

Low voter turn-out has been a problem that most democratic governments have been grappling with since their inception. More recently formed democracies like Colombia have had appalling voter turn outs of only 52 % in their recent elections (OECD, 2016) while other more developed countries like Belgium have a more comforting statistic of 89.37% (How The World Votes: 2019, 2019). Voters form the bedrock of any democracy and without their maximum attendance during elections, the efficiency of the system is severely compromised. In order to truly understand as to why voter turn-out isn't at its optimum number, we need to look closely at one of the largest democracies that is struggling with this issue – the Indian subcontinent. Through the use of a survey conducted on nearly 500 voters along with case studies on people who did not vote in the 2019 General Elections held in India, the problem at hand will be comprehended and thoroughly analyzed.

BACKGROUND

The Indian electoral process with nearly 900 million eligible voters and 543 constituencies can be perceived as overwhelming; however, at the core of it, it is quite simple and understandable. The general elections decide the members of the Lok Sabha or the House of the People, the lower house of the parliament. The 35 political parties (as of the 2019 election) represented in the parliament nominate one of their members for each of the constituencies across the nation. Voters vote for their candidate of choice within their respective constituency. The party or coalition with most elected candidates nominates one of their members to be the Prime Minister who then selects ministers to serve in a cabinet.

The 2019 General Elections that dominated the subcontinent's political field was a tumultuous journey. The two rivaling parties, the Bhartiya Janta Party and the Indian National Congress fought head to head and ultimately, the elections that were conducted across six phases resulted in the reinstating of Prime Minister Narender Modi and the victory of the BJP by an unprecedented margin.
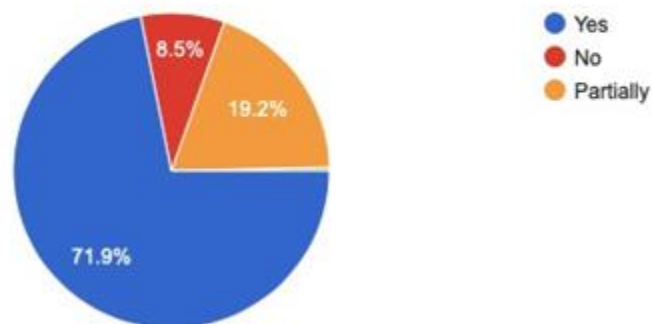

Total voters vs Polling turnout from 1952

India's first Lok Sabha vote was held in 1952, soon after the country's freedom from years of subjugation under the British Raj. With the population of the country exponentially increasing, the number of eligible voters has almost quadrupled since the first election. As one can see from the above visualisation (Sridharan, 2019), as the population has increased, the gap between eligible voters and actual voters polled has widened. While it is true that the voter turn-out in the 2019 elections has been the highest India has ever seen, an overall of 63.98%, it is a figure that can use a great deal of improvement.

DISCUSSION

Do you believe the electoral process is democratic and fair?

A common misconception that justifies the low voter turn-out is voter apathy. Most people assume that the lack of voters is due to the assumption that the general population has lost faith in the electoral system, or far worse – cannot be bothered to vote. However, this myth can easily be dispelled as according to the results of a survey conducted for this paper: 71.4 % people consider the electoral process *fully* democratic and fair while 19.5 % consider it *partially* democratic and fair. Keeping these statistics in mind, it is safe to say that the primary cause of low voter turn-out is **not** their disillusionment with the system. Furthermore, living in a digital age, the elections are a practically inescapable event for any citizen of the Indian subcontinent. From newspaper advertisements to social media campaigns, the elections permeate the boundaries of political and personal and leave the average person compelled to vote.

Corroborated with the study conducted, the root cause of low voter turn-out can be pointed out towards rigid government policies. While it is true that the Election Commission of India works tirelessly in the months prior to the elections to ensure the running of a smooth process, there are certain significant drawbacks in the foundations of voter policies as well as their execution.

Overshadowed issues that were brought to the forefront during the study were situations when eligible voters were not physically present in their constituency and thus were restricted from voting. According to a study conducted by the Ministry of External Affairs in December 2018, there are 13,113,360 non-residential Indians (NRIs) distributed across the world (Affairs, 2018). The Election Commission clearly states that NRIs "will be allowed to vote in person at the polling station on production of your original passport." (Overseas Electors, 2019). Due to such restrictions on the voting procedure, this population of eligible voters is usually unable to be a part of the extremely integral process of choosing the party of their choice. It must be kept in mind that this statistic does not include people who are within India but not physically present in their constituencies. People from various towns and cities travel across the subcontinent for education or work and are unable to, due to logistics, be present in their respective constituencies. Such confinements placed on the voters also reduces the possibility of maximising voter turn-out.

Furthermore, a plethora of subjects in the study stated that they were unable to vote in the 2019 General Elections due to inability to register for a voter ID card. While the voter ID card is not the only form of identification for voters, many can only rely on it because of the lack of other identification proofs. When asked as to why they did not possess one, most commented that it was due to the unprecedented time period the voter card takes to be made.

The above hurdles are faced by people who are considered eligible to vote; however, one must also keep in mind the rather narrow pre-requisites required for being considered an eligible voter. To register as a voter, a citizen of the country who is above 18 years old must be "ordinarily resident at address". This is a problem for those who travel the country for either work or education and do not have proof of residence for longer than two years and thus are unable to vote.

CONCLUSION

With the help of the study conducted, it can be understood that the voter turn-out statistics in the Indian subcontinent can be subjected to a great deal of improvement with a few altercations in the voting methods such as creating online voting platforms for NRIs or widening the requirements for being considered a voter. While it is true that such changes come with their fair share of hurdles, the Election Commission along with the Central government must make an effort to ensure that the largest number of eligible voters participate in the integral process of elections. The cornerstone of any democratic country is to give power to its people, all its people. Voting is not a privilege, it is a right.

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