

UPSC
NCERT Summary
Elections & Democracy – 1

Introduction

All citizens cannot take direct part in making every decision. Therefore, representatives are elected by the people. This is how elections become important. Whenever we think of India as a democracy, our mind invariably turns to the last elections. Elections have today become the most visible symbol of the democratic process. We often distinguish between direct and indirect democracy.

A direct democracy is one where the citizens directly participate in the day-to-day decision making and in the running of the government. The ancient city-states in Greece were considered examples of direct democracy.

Many would consider local governments, especially gram sabhas, to be closest examples of direct democracy. But this kind of direct democracy cannot be practiced when a decision has to be taken by lakhs and crores of people. That is why rule by the people usually means rule by people's representatives.

In such an arrangement citizens choose their representatives who, in turn, are actively involved in governing and administering the country. The method followed to choose these representatives is referred to as an election. Thus, the citizens have a limited role in taking major decisions and in running the administration. They are not very actively involved in making of the policies. Citizens are involved only indirectly, through their elected representatives. In this arrangement, where all major decisions are taken by elected representatives, the method by which people elect their representatives becomes very important.

Election system in India: To Understand it better, let us look one dramatic instance. In the Lok Sabha elections of 1984, the Congress party came to power winning 415 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats — more than 80% of the seats. Such a victory was never achieved by any party in the Lok Sabha. What did this election show?

The Congress party won four-fifths of the seats. Does it mean that four out of five Indian voters voted for the Congress party? Actually not. Take a look at the enclosed table. The Congress party got 48% of the votes. This means that only 48% of those who voted, voted in favour of the candidates put up by the Congress party, but the party still managed to win more than 80% of the seats in the Lok Sabha. Look at the performance of other parties. The BJP got 7.4 percent votes but less than one percent seats. How did that happen? This happened because in our country we follow a special method of elections. Under this system:

- (i) The entire country is divided into 543 constituencies;
- (ii) Each constituency elects one representative; and

Votes and seats won by some major parties in Lok Sabha Election of 1984		
Party	Votes (%)	Seats
Congress	48.0	415
BJP	7.4	2
Janata	6.7	10
Lok Dal	5.7	3
CPI (M)	5.7	22
Telugu Desam	4.1	30
DMK	2.3	2
AIADMK	1.0	7
Akali Dal	1.0	7
AGP	1.0	7

(iii) The candidate who secures the highest number of votes in that constituency is declared elected.

It is important to note that in this system whoever has more votes than all other candidates, is declared elected. The winning candidate need not secure a majority of the votes. This method is called the First Past the Post (FPTP) system. In the electoral race, the candidate who is ahead of others, who crosses the winning post first of all, is the winner. This method is also called the Plurality System. This is the method of election prescribed by the Constitution.

Example: The Congress party won greater share of seats than its share of votes because in many of the constituencies in which its candidates won, they secured less than 50% of the votes. If there are several candidates, the winning candidate often gets much less than 50% of the votes. The votes that go to all the losing candidates go 'waste', for those candidates or parties get no seat from those votes. Suppose a party gets only 25 percent of the votes in every constituency, but everyone else gets even less votes. In that case, the party could win all the seats with only 25 percent votes or even less.

(i) Proportional Representation

- In Israel once the votes are counted, each party is allotted the share of seats in the parliament in proportion to its share of votes. Each party fills its quota of seats by picking those many of its nominees from a preference list that has been declared before the elections. This system of elections is called the Proportional Representation (PR) system. In

this system a party gets the same proportion of seats as its proportion of votes.

- In the PR system there could be two variations. In some countries, like Israel or the entire country is treated as one constituency and seats are allocated to each party according to its share of votes in the national election. The other method is when the country is divided into several multi-member constituencies as in Argentina and Portugal. Each party prepares a list of candidates for each constituency, depending on how many he to be elected from that constituency. In both these variations, voters exercise their preference for a party and not a candidate. The seats in a constituency are distributed on the basis of votes polled by a party. Thus, representatives from a constituency, would and do belong to different parties. In India, we have adopted PR system on a limited scale for indirect elections. The Constitution prescribes a third and complex variation of the PR system for the election of President, Vice President, and for the election to the Rajya Sabha and Vidhan Parishads.

(ii) How does PR work in Rajya Sabha elections

A third variant of PR, the Single Transferable Vote System (STV) is followed for Rajya Sabha elections. Every State has a specific quota of seats in the Rajya Sabha. The members are elected by the respective State legislative assemblies. The voters are the MLAs in that State. Every voter is red to rank candidates according to her or his preference. To be declared the winner, a candidate must secure a minimum quota of votes, which is determined by a formula:

• Total Votes polled

$$\frac{\text{Total Votes polled}}{\text{Total number of candidates to be elected}} + 1$$

Total number of candidates to be elected + 1

For example if 4 Rajya Sabha members have to be elected by the 200 MLAs in Rajasthan, the winner would require $(200/4 + 1 = 40+1)$ 41 votes. When the votes are counted it is done on the basis of first preference votes secured by each candidate, of which the candidate has secured the first preference votes. If after the counting of all first preference votes, required number of candidates fail to fulfil the quota, the candidate who secured the lowest votes of first preference is eliminated and his/her votes are transferred to those who are mentioned as second preference on those ballot papers. This process continues till the required number of candidates are declared elected.

(iii) Why did India adopt the First system?

- The answer is not very difficult to guess. If you have carefully read the box explaining the Rajya Sabha elections, you would have noticed that it is a

complicated system which may work in a small country, but would be difficult to work in a sub-continental country like India. The reason for the popularity and success of the FPTP system is its simplicity. The entire election system is extremely simple to understand even for common voters who may have no specialized knowledge about politics and elections. There is also a clear choice presented to the voters at the time of elections.

- Voters have to simply end or sea candidate or a party while voting. Depending on the nature of actual politics, voters may either give greater importance to the party or to the candidate or balance the two. The FPTP system offers voters a choice not simply between parties but specific candidates. In other electoral systems, especially PR systems, voters are often asked to choose a party and the representatives are elected on the basis of party lists, As a result, there is no one representative who represents and is responsible for one locality. In constituency based system like the FPTP, the voters know who their own representative is and can hold him or her countable.
- More importantly, the makers of our Constitution also felt that PR based election may not be suitable for giving a stable government in a parliamentary system. This system requires that the executive has majority in the legislature. You will notice that the PR system may not produce a clear majority because seats in the legislature would be divided on the basis of share of votes. The FPTP system generally gives the largest party or coalition some extra bonus seats, more than their share of votes would allow. Thus this system makes it possible for parliamentary government to function smoothly and effectively by facilitating the formation of a stable government. Finally, the FTPT system encourages voters from different social groups to come together to win an election in a locality. In a diverse country like India, a PR system would encourage each community to form its own nation-wide party. This may also have been at the back of the mind of our constitution makers.
- The experience of the working of the Constitution has confirmed the expectation of the constitution makers. The FPTP system has proved to be simple and familiar to ordinary voters. It has helped larger parties to win clear majorities at the centre and the State level. The system has also discouraged political parties that get all their votes only from one caste or community. Normally, the working of the FPTP system results in a two-party system.
- This means that there are two major competitors for power and power is often shared by these two parties alternately. It is difficult for new parties or the third party to enter the competition and share power. In

this respect, the experience of FPTP in India is slightly different. After independence, though we adopted the FPTP system, there emerged a one party dominance and along with it, there existed many smaller parties. After 1989, India is witnessing the functioning of the multiparty coalitions. At the same time, gradually, in many States , a two party competition is emerging. But the distinguishing feature of India's party system is that the rise of coalitions has made it possible for new and smaller parties to enter in to electoral competition in spite of the FPTP system.

RESERVATION OF CONSTITUENCIES

We have noticed that in the FPTP election system, the candidate who secures the highest votes in a particular constituency is declared elected. This often works to the disadvantage of the smaller social groups. This is even more significant in the Indian social context. We have had a history of caste based discrimination. In such a social system, the FPTP electoral system can mean that the dominant social groups and castes can win everywhere and the oppressed social groups may continue to remain unrepresented. Our Constitution makers were aware of this difficulty and the need to provide a way to ensure fair and just representation to the oppressed social groups.

This issue was debated even before independence and the British government had introduced 'separate electorates'. This system meant that for electing a representative from a particular community, only those voters would be eligible who belong to that community. In the constituent assembly, many members expressed a fear that this will not suit our purposes. Therefore, it was decided to adopt the system of reserved constituencies. In this system, all voters in a constituency are eligible to vote but the candidates must belong to only a particular community or social section for which the seat is reserved. There are certain social groups which may be spread across the Country. In a particular constituency, their numbers may not be sufficient to be able to influence a victory of a candidate. However, taken across the country they are a significantly size able group. To ensure their proper representation, a system of reservation becomes necessary. The Constitution provides for reservation of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This provision was made initially for a period of 10 years and as a result of successive constitutional amendments, has been extended up to 2010. The Parliament can take a decision to further extend it, when the period of reservation expires. The number of seats reserved for both of these groups is in proportion to their share in the population of India. Today, of the 543 elected seats in the Lok Sabha, 79 are reserved for Scheduled Castes and 41 are reserved for Scheduled Tribes.

Who decides which constituency is to be reserved? On what basis is this decision taken? This decision is taken by an independent body called the Delimitation Commission. The Delimitation Commission is appointed by the President of India and works in collaboration with the Election Commission of India. It is appointed for the purpose of drawing up the boundaries of constituencies all over the country. A quota of constituencies to be reserved in each State is fixed depending on the proportion of SC or ST in that State. After drawing the boundaries, the Delimitation Commission looks at the composition of population in each constituency. Those constituencies that have the highest proportion of Scheduled Tribe population are reserved for ST. In the case of Scheduled Castes, the Delimitation Commission looks at two things. It picks constituencies that have higher proportion of Scheduled Caste population. But it also spreads these constituencies in different regions of the State. This is done because the Scheduled Caste population is generally spread evenly through out the country. These reserved constituencies can be rotated each time the Delimitation exercise is undertaken.

The Constitution does not make similar reservation for other disadvantaged groups. Of late there has been a strong demand seeking reservation of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for women. Given the fact that very few women are elected to representative bodies, the demand for reserving one-third seats for women is increasingly being articulated. Reservation of seats for women has been provided for in rural and urban local bodies. A similar provision for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas would require an amendment to the Constitution. Such an amendment has been proposed several times in the Parliament but has not yet been passed.