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Political Science: Essay

Realist theory of Democracy and Folk Theory of Democracy

As the world is trying to understand Brexit, election of Trump as President, the electoral surprises coming from Europe, a book is released which seems to make sense of everything that is happening in the democratic countries in the world. The book introduces a new theory which explains the way people vote and why they do that. In *Democracy for Realists*, written by Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, it is argued that the fundamental reason for partisan allegiance which makes the contemporary system of democracy open to exploitation by all-powerful, unscrupulous elites who transform into leaders and further adding to this they argue that voting behaviour is rooted in social identities, group affinity and “myopic retrospections”. (Christopher H. Achen) The authors of this book challenge what they call is “folk theory” of democracy. This theory assumes that policy preferences and ideology explain the voter’s behaviour.

According to the conventional perspective, democracy begins with voters, where a common citizen is given preferences of what kind of government should exist by electing a leader, obviously the election of leader depends on the what majority vote for. Under democracy a person becomes a leader and derives this legitimacy and power from the consent of the public. Such an idea of democracy has passed onto generations, not only confined to the United States but across the globe. At Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln regarded democratic government is of the people, by the people, and for the people.” (Lincoln)This idea constitutes what can be called as “folk theory” of democracy, where appealing and assuring ideas are put forward by the democratic leaders who put forward the vision that common man lives under an ethical form of government which works in their favour.

The “folk theory” derives its basis from the ideas pinned during the Enlightenment era during the 18th century in Europe. Core assumption of this theory is that humans are rational actors who before acting upon circumstances accordingly. first asses them the “folk theory” of democracy recognizes the restraints of the citizens capacities and proposes that the voters can and do conform to the democratic functions. According to this theory of democracy, government is held culpable for its policies and actions by the public. However, Achen and Bartels argue that these are unrealistic expectations which rely on the citizens. (Schwennicke) One most common expectation from an ordinary man is that he is well-aware and acquainted about variety of policy alternatives they face during elections; thus, they choose to vote for a candidate that most closely favours to their biases and preferences. The proponents of “realist theory” of democracy challenge another notion of “folk theory” that the political parties which are elected in the election meet the needs and preferences of their voters and tailor their policies according to the demands of ordinary citizens. There are further two models of folk democracy, firstly a populist one which has two forms namely direct democracy and representative democracy. The second model is leadership selection and retrospective voting.

As a critique, “realist theory” of democracy was presented by Achen and Bartels as an alternative of the folk theory. In their book, they have given two reasons why the folk theory is completely wrong. First, public doesn’t care much about politics thus they don’t give it much though. Secondly, politics can be labelled as a domain where people act rationally, where people calculate and maximize their utility. Instead people pick up information from the political world and they are influenced by the state of economy and most importantly the affiliations they adopt to a certain political party or an individual since their youth. So not the political facts or the actions of the government but rather these loyalties drive the political behaviour of individuals. According to the realist theory of democracy the motivations that lead to a certain voting behaviour are rooted in social identity and attachment to a certain group. And this social identity becomes prominent in the course of a certain political event which strengthen individual’s attachment to that particular group. The policy preferences, as the realist theory suggests are just a by-product of the biasness developed by the voters. Realist view of democratic representation is based on identity congruence that exists between voters and the candidate contesting elections. (L. B. Christopher H. Achen)

Moreover, according to the theory presented by Achen and Bartels, mostly it is during the political campaign that the parties begin reminding their voters about their partisan identities and convince them to go polls through informal communication which is done among the members of the group and formal communication by thr groups. The purpose of doing this is to prompt the voters of how their identity is connected with that of the group and its candidates. Many examples are available which show how group identities translate into political loyalty. However, one shortfall of this theory is that it does not answer how identities are constructed, though the authors do inform their audience that foundation of a social entity can be traced into ethnic, racial, religious ties but beyond this general description they don’t define what else social identity constitutes of.

Most appealing part of the realist theory of democracy, which explains voter’s behaviour is that the group affiliation intensifies when a political event makes that particular identity feel threatened, discriminated or noticeable. The proponents of this theory mention in their book *Democracy for Realists,* a perquisite for attaining greater scholarly intellect precision and actual political change lies in abandoning the “folk theory of democracy”.

The assumptions set by the realist theory of democracy are very much true if one has to analyse voter’s behaviour. There are many countries in the world where identity has shaped the politics and voter’s behaviour towards the political parties, be it India, Bangladesh or Pakistan, Rwanda which went through worlds worst genocide, Yugoslavia and in Europe, countries like Netherlands, France are now inclined more towards anti-globalization approach, where basic argument is saving the national identity of country which is in danger from the forces of globalization, migrants etc. Thus, the public now is keener to vote those candidates who talk about anti-immigration policies and more about keeping intact the national identity. Thus, it can be said that nationalism, which although holds a very negative connotation is now on the rise again in most parts of world and the reason is that the leaders of extreme right parties are exploiting the sentiments of national public by use social identity as a tool.

The general elections in Pakistan were held on 25th July 2018, after Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) completed its five-year tenure. A very new party came to power in the aftermath of the elections and PML-N was defeated. Imran Khan took oath as Prime Minister of Pakistan on 28th August 2018, who belongs from Pakistan Tahreek-e- Insaaf (PTI), the winning party. Though country is trapped into many crises, be it economic, terrorism, political but identity crisis in the country are becoming stronger. Pakistan is reaching new heights of identity politics, which is a very alarming situation for the stability of the country. Although democratic since past few years, but the politics of identity is seeking recognition in a very dictatorial manner whereby other groups are demonized and held responsible for the grievance that the particular social group suffers.

Pakistan has a very diverse societal makeup, and sentiments of exclusion in such a country push the nations towards division rather than adopting inclusionary approaches. The very foundation of state and society in Pakistan are shaken, because identity politics has gained impetus, its appealing to people and has successfully instilled hate against other groups. Groups like MQM, Baloch nationalist parties, Sindhi nationalist parties, Pashtun nationalist parties any others have been the sources of exploitation of political identity. For instance, for many years MQM exploited those who had migrated, called *Muhajirs or Urdu Speaking* community of Pakistan and won elections in major cities of Sindh. Before 2018 elections, Pakistan had two major parties, PML-N and Pakistan People’s Party, both of these parties have been involved in using identity card in their respective provinces to win electoral support. The politicians of the country without realising what a terrible strategy they’ve been using to cash votes by exploiting identity have sown seeds of conflict and hatred which have become hard to handle.

In the recently held elections, the voter turn out rate was 52%, where the winning party PTI scored 32% of the votes, i.e. it was successful in attaining 149 seats in National Assembly, while in previous elections it only scored 35 seats. PML-N, the major rivals of PTI gained 24% votes and attain only 89 seats, while during the previous elections they were the majority party that had secured 157 seats and formed government. PPP, the third major party, was able to secure only 13 percent of votes. (House) These elections according to election observer missions have recognised that electoral framework of the country and its implementation conform the international values.

According to the Freedom House report of 2019, the elections in Pakistan took place in a very manipulated environment, and the force behind it was the military and judicial establishment, whose motive was to stop the Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, the incumbent of PML-N from coming back to power, while attaining clear majority for PTI. The year before election was turbulent, as it was marked with corruption charges against then ruling elites, and as a consequence Sharif, who was Prime Minister then had to step down from his position and was banned from contesting political office in the coming elections along with the sentence to prison. It has also been reported that state agencies had barred many new channels and journalists from speaking freely, or news coverage just few months prior to elections became biased and restricted. Despite all this, the opposition parties in Pakistan hold a very significant position, which are free to campaign, hold some share in power at both national and provincial level.

The new trends in the democratic societies show how the voters choose their candidate, based on their deeply rooted identities and with whom they believe their identity resembles. The assumption of the “folk theory” of democracy in such scenario look extremely flawed, because it can be seen in case of Pakistan, just one example, where people don’t vote as rational actors, calculating cost and benefit of bringing into power a candidate who might be incompetent, yet they cast their vote for that political party. Very little work has been done on realist theory of democracy. The political behaviour of individuals where their identities are exploited by political parties may not be exactly representing their real behaviour. The realist theory of democracy can be seen as new starting point for researchers to explore the voter’s behaviour under the realist theory of democracy.

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