

Debating Electoral Systems: The first-past-the-post system remains preferable over proportional representation

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Monetary Fund (IMF) in its *Global Financial Stability Report* of October 2012 came to this unusual (by IMF standards) conclusion that “Australia, Canada, India and Malaysia have a relatively low degree of exposure to international banking and also

avoided the worst of the effects of the global financial crisis”. The Nayak Committee report seems to have missed this basic lesson of the global financial crisis and has fallen into the old trap of throwing the baby with the bathwater.

Fall of the Left

What explains the fall of the parliamentary left and what sort of politics can revive it?

If one goes by the 16th Lok Sabha election results, except for Kerala and Tripura, the parliamentary left seems to have been relegated to irrelevance in the rest of the country. In the new Lok Sabha, the Communist Party of India (CPI) has just one Member of Parliament, from Kerala, while the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) has nine, five of them from Kerala and two from Tripura. The decline of both the CPI's and the CPI(M)'s vote share at the national level has been precipitous – the CPI's from 1.4% in 2009 to 0.8% in 2014, and the CPI(M)'s from 5.3% in 2009 to 3.2% in 2014. But what of West Bengal, once a stronghold of the parliamentary left?

Indeed, West Bengal was once a bastion of the left, even eight years ago. The warning bells chimed in 2009, but the state leadership of the CPI(M) ignored those signs. The older generation of party leaders, those who had been through the grind in the trade union and peasant struggles of the past, had by then retired or passed away. This was a new generation of leaders that had by-and-large come on the scene after 1977; it knew less, much less at first hand, of the exploitation, oppression and domination by the ruling classes and the state. Indeed, it did not even seem to have learned much from its failures in Singur and Nandigram – thought it could do what it wanted in Lalgurh too, by fiat.

With 235 Left Front Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in the West Bengal Assembly of 294 after the 2006 state assembly elections, the CPI(M) state leadership assumed it had the right to decide on behalf of the state's people without the latter's consent. Even the shock of 2011 – the humiliating electoral defeat in the state assembly elections – did not seem to have brought it back to its senses. And now, in the 16th Lok Sabha elections, the vote share of the Front has plummeted to 29% in the state, this from 41% just three years ago; the Front could win only two of the 42 seats from West Bengal.

In the industrial hub of Asansol with a significant organised working class, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won and the Trinamool Congress came in second. Even in Kolkata, the pavement and slum dwellers, the street hawkers, even those evicted

by the more recent urban development projects of the last three years deserted the ranks of the left. The charges made by the CPI(M) of widespread ballot-rigging by the Trinamool Congress, even if true, only seem to detract from real reason for the fall – the party has alienated itself from its core constituencies.

The CPI(M)'s campaign slogan was “reject Congress, defeat BJP”. The party leadership at the national level wanted to build a “secular and democratic alternative” to the Congress and the BJP, envisaging a possible Third Front emerging after the elections. But in the rush to gather “secular” allies, the party's credibility certainly went for a toss as it tried to align with the JD(U) which had spent 17 years as a BJP ally.

The CPI(M) needs to realise that the secularism of the Nehruvian era has been mutilated, not merely by the criminal acts of the Hindutva nationalists but also by the “soft Hindutva” politics of the Congress Party. Hindutva nationalism, soft or hard, according to one's pick, has been projected as synonymous with Indian nationalism, sidelining what was anti-colonial and secular. The struggle between those who want a secular democracy and those who want to establish a Hindu state seems to have moved quite significantly in favour of the latter. So, blaming Prakash Karat for the CPI(M)'s predicament is simply wrong; the party must examine its very approach to the secularisation of Indian society.

Likewise, one cannot put the blame for the Bengal debacle on the shoulders of the West Bengal leadership of the party alone. The CPI(M) has been engaged in murky politics as regards neo-liberalism. Since the mid-1990s, at the centre it has engaged in an intellectual crusade against neo-liberal ideology and policy, while in the states where it had been in power it conveniently accommodated the neo-liberal agenda and dutifully served the interests of big business.

The left has fallen and now its leaders will be conferring about how it must rise, but should that rise be measured in terms of electoral ups and downs alone? What about the politics of self-emancipation that Marx was so concerned about?

Debating Electoral Systems

The first-past-the-post system remains preferable over proportional representation.

Despite winning only 31% of the vote share, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has obtained as many as 282 seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. This is the lowest vote share ever for a party with a majority in the Lok Sabha. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as a whole managed 331

seats with a mere 38.2% vote share. These facts have been played up by some critics of the new government, who have argued that despite the numbers in the Lok Sabha this government does not represent the majority of Indians. That at the same time many parties which have recorded substantial vote

shares have won few or no seats has led to the questioning of the "first-past-the-post" (FPTP) system of Indian elections and calls for proportional representation.

In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP won 71 out of the 80 seats with a 42% vote share while the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) could not win even one seat though it obtained 20% of the votes. At the national level, the BSP won the third highest vote share of 4.2% but ended up without a single seat in the Lok Sabha. On the other hand, parties like the Trinamool Congress (TMC) with 3.8%, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (AIADMK) with 3.3% and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) with 1.7% of the votes got 34, 37 and 20 seats, respectively.

Can such vote-seat patterns lend weight to the arguments for proportional representation (PR)? The large tally for the BJP was facilitated by its strong performance in western, northern and central India. The party won 241 of the 256 seats it contested in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Goa, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Delhi, with vote shares ranging from 29% in Bihar to 59% in Gujarat. Clearly a massive anti-incumbency wave against the Congress and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) helped the BJP reap huge gains in these states. In many of the other states, non-BJP regional parties which had marked out their independence from the Congress (the TMC, AIADMK and BJD) benefited from this anti-Congress wave. And certain other powerful regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the BSP which did not oppose the Congress strongly, lost badly.

What the party-wise break-up in the Lok Sabha shows is a reflection of this voting pattern, even if the final outcome tends to exaggerate the effect of the anger against the Congress/UPA. Much of this is not so much due to the vagaries of the FPTP system but the nature of the party system in India and the conjunctural severity of the anti-Congress wave.

India's party system has evolved from a single party system to a regionalised, federalised multiparty system that well

represents the social, regional, linguistic and ideological cleavages in India's society. This has been made possible by the FPTP system which has allowed political forces moored to smaller regions and sub-regions to win seats in those areas by defeating the incumbent heavyweight. This ability of regional parties to defeat the previously dominant party in a particular region is an important positive feature of the FPTP as weaker voices have had to be accommodated by the larger national parties. The need for a PR system is justified only if there is a systemic anomaly that prevents smaller parties from winning seats. That does not seem to be the case even in this general election.

There are significant problems to a PR system as well. For one, in an apparent contradiction, the PR system could make all future governments inherently unstable as no party would ever be able to get a majority. This in itself may not be a bad outcome, since stability is often a code word for suppressing marginal voices. But the experience of Nepal over the past few years illustrates how the PR system could well exaggerate instability and put government in a logjam without any concomitant positive consequences. There may then be calls for more post-poll alliances rather than the more homogeneous and tested pre-poll alliances as in the FPTP system. Second, a PR system would empower party leaders over local representatives if a list model is adopted and this will not give small parties, which now can win a seat or two in their region of influence and have a voice in Parliament, any national presence. Third, even if a mixed-PR model is adopted, there is no guarantee that this complicated system would address the problem of instability and the need to provide representation to the small parties.

The skewed seat share in the present Lok Sabha does alert us to the problems with the FPTP system but does not seem to be a strong enough argument to switch to a PR system. If some parties have been rendered weak in these elections, this has more to do with their politics, government record and inability to stop a fall in vote share, and less to do with the vagaries of the FPTP system.

FROM 50 YEARS AGO

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WEEKLY NOTES

Prices: Symptom or Disease?

With characteristic humility, shortly after his election, Prime Minister-designate Lal Bahadur Shastri requested the cooperation of his colleagues in the Cabinet as also of all Members of Parliament in his efforts to shoulder the very onerous responsibilities which will now devolve on him. Characteristically again, he refrained from any utterances on matters of policy regarding the many problems that face the country, both in the political and the economic fields. There are two exceptions to this. He declared, with unconcealed emphasis, that he would strive to take the country towards socialism –

a process that Pandit Nehru had initiated. In the social order he had in mind, Shastriji stated, a few would not be allowed to monopolise the national wealth leaving others in poverty. The second exception was his stress on the urgency of arresting soaring prices. ...

The relatively faster rise in the general index of prices in 1963-64 as compared with the previous year has led the Government already to take a number of measures, covering both control of credit, selective and overall, and controls over various commodities. Thus, forward trading in foodgrains has been banned throughout the country. The communiqué giving effect to the ban stated that the step had become necessary since measures adopted so far to check speculative excesses had failed to produce the expected results.

High and rising prices have continued to scourge not only the more obvious physical targets of the Plan but also all such efforts as

the Government has made from time to time to prevent the inequality in the distribution of incomes from worsening. ...

Incomes have been increasing, thanks to the Plan outlays and defence expenditure. What has aggravated the prices position in 1963-64 has been the relatively faster rate of growth in the capital goods, basic and intermediary industries sectors where the accent of planned development has been focussed ever since numerous gaps in the industrial structure were discovered and hurried attempts made to fill these up even at the cost of throwing to the winds some of the basic tenets of the Industrial Policy Resolution. All these factors are likely to continue and operate. In the case of the prices of agricultural commodities, the Government's efforts to control their further increase at this juncture may meet with little success since it happens to be the beginning of the period when for some months to come prices normally increase.