

# INDIAN POLITICS 'BETWEEN' ELECTIONS: STUDIES ON THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

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## Abstract

Politics in India is viewed largely through the prism of elections. Every policy announcement made by the government and even statements or actions by individual politicians are analysed for their potential electoral impact. This preoccupation with elections is not entirely unusual since the discourse on politics in most democracies is dominated by elections, partially influenced by the seminal theoretical contribution by Downs (1957) that emphasized on the electoral motive behind political actions. But the hegemony of elections in India studies seems more complete than in other parts of the world, with near absence of empirical work on other political processes or institutions<sup>1</sup> that do not give pre-eminence to elections. One reason for the skewed focus is because elections, locally regarded as 'festivals of Indian democracy', elicit great interest from the people. Political observers, who are unacquainted with the dynamics of Indian democracy, are frequently surprised to learn that electoral turnouts in most parts of India, a country with less than a hundred year legacy of modern democracy, are routinely high across elections to different governing bodies. In many cases, turnout levels surpass those in nations that have more established democratic traditions such as in US and parts of Europe. It is, therefore, natural that the 'electoral event' that galvanizes mass participation from people across the socio-economic divides of caste, class and religion would received is proportionate attention from the media and scholarly community alike. Over time the dominance of electoral studies has solidified with the advent of large sample surveys (such as the national election surveys since 1967) that are motivated to interpret the vote preferences of Indian voters. Alongside this, the Election Commission of India has, since the 1990s, been proactive in the timely publishing of election results to the national and state assembly elections<sup>2</sup>. The availability of these high-quality data-sets has stimulated a number of studies that have cumulatively advanced our collective knowledge about the dynamics of elections in India. For instance, the much cited theory of the 'second democratic upsurge' by Yogendra Yadav was built on systematic evidence of persistently high electoral turnouts by voters belonging to marginalized communities such as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and minorities. Their striking finding that the socio-economic plebeians in Indian society vote in higher proportions than the historically dominant social groups differentiates the functioning of democracy in India with its workings in other parts of the world. But in contrast to the wide-ranging analyses on elections, there have been no comparable efforts to gather information on the functioning of other political process and institutions. Wilkinson(2010) highlights the many substantive gaps in our understanding of non-electoral politics in India. To be fair, in recent times some encouraging beginnings have been made with the publication of two 'State of Democracy in South Asia' (SDSA) reports in 2008 and 2017, that have broadened the scope of inquiry to questions on the state of democracy, popular trust in institutions and so on. These are, however, still early explorations into a vast uncharted space, and we need more studies on Indian politics that go beyond the narrow sphere of elections.