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THE IMPACT OF INSTANT UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE

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On 15 August 2017, India will celebrate the seventieth anniversary of its independence. Acting just a few years after independence in 1947, the authors of the Constitution of 1950 took the extraordinarily bold step of establishing universal suffrage.¹ All adult citizens—at that time they numbered 173 million—received the right to vote. With this singular act, India became the world's first large democracy to adopt universal adult suffrage from its very inception as an independent nation.² We call India's move "instant universal suffrage," to distinguish it from "incremental suffrage," which is the more common historical experience by which the vote is extended more gradually.³ In nearly all Western democracies, suffrage rights broadened only over an extended period of time. Full as these rights may be now, their extension took place in anything but an instant fashion.

We argue that instant universal suffrage has been key to India's national survival—a point that the vast literature on Indian democracy surprisingly overlooks. Yet instant universal suffrage has also weakened the state's capacity to deliver public goods. In other words, instant universal suffrage has been a great nation-building and nation-preserving tool, but it has hurt state-building and state capacity. The incremental extension of suffrage in the manner seen in U.S. or British history might have strengthened state capacity in India. But would this geographically vast and heavily peopled country, with its wide array of tongues, creeds, castes, classes, and regions, have been able to endure as a unified nation amid the prolonged disenfranchisement of large swaths of its citizenry? The answer is surely no.

What links can we trace between democracy on the one hand and national survival and state capacity on the other? By giving every citizen of such an ethnically and religiously diverse nation a voice in choosing rulers, instant universal suffrage made the mass involvement of citizens in national life a routine exercise. India became real to its people through their periodic but regular vote. Yet instant universal suffrage also affected other aspects of India's political system, shaping the priorities and capacities of the state as well as the forms of mobilization and contestation that various social groups favored. In all these realms, the pressure of mass inclusion made itself sharply felt, and left state capacity impaired.

Is this analysis merely a reprise of Samuel P. Huntington's famous argument that when you provide more political participation you get less political order?⁴ We think not. We speak not of political participation in all its forms, but only of the franchise and elections. Moreover, we do not concentrate on political order, but consider the state's capacity to deliver a range of public services, including education and health. Finally, the links that we propose between national survival and democracy formed no part of Huntington's argument.

To make our case regarding instant universal suffrage's impact, we use a broadly comparative method. We look at India's experience in light of the consequences that incremental suffrage had for political parties and government policies in the United States and the United Kingdom. Such a comparison throws the consequences of instant universal suffrage for India into high relief.

Comparing India's Democracy

In recent decades, leading students of how democracy emerges and persists have offered implicit tributes to the surprising resilience of democracy in India, a country where (in theory) this form of government probably should not exist at all. Robert A. Dahl wrote, "India's widespread poverty combined with its acute multicultural divisions would appear to be fertile grounds for the rampant growth of anti-democratic movements powerful enough to overthrow democracy and install an authoritarian dictatorship."⁵ Adam Przeworski, who famously found a very strong positive correlation between income and democracy across numerous countries, noted that "the odds against democracy in India were extremely high" given the low per capita income there.⁶

Much has been written about the reasons for India's continued residence in the "democracy" column. Our focus is not on *why* democracy is still around, but on *what* its consequences have been. Yet we cannot resist citing Dahl's intriguing comment that "democracy, one might say, is the national ideology of India."⁷ Dahl could not have said this at the

time of independence in 1947, but it has progressively become the case. Democracy has become an ideological pillar, one of those things that makes modern India what it is.

What caused this remarkable development? How, in just a few decades, did democracy become such a widely shared national ideology among the people—now numbering well more than a billion—of one of the world’s most diverse and unequal societies? The provision of instant universal suffrage offers the answer to this question. Through the regular act of voting, more and more of India’s citizens began to develop a sense that they, too, had a stake in the polity and hence the nation.

In the United States, the Civil War ended slavery in 1865, yet it took a century for full voting rights to extend to African Americans. In Switzerland, women received the vote only in 1971. Indeed, across Western democracies generally, the process of universalizing the adult franchise involved drawn-out contests among various stakeholders.

Consider the U.S. and British examples. Alexander Keyssar has described at length the long journey to universal adult suffrage in the United States, one replete with conflicts of both interests and ideas.⁸ These arguments were not private disputes among leading political figures, but topics of wide public debate from the era of the U.S. founding into the nineteenth century. Merchants and large cultivators had an unmistakable economic interest in keeping the franchise narrow, while tenant farmers, journeymen, and laborers (not to mention African Americans and women) had something to gain from the expansion of political rights. Similarly, landowners preferred to see the franchise depend on freehold ownership, while city dwellers, shopkeepers, and artisans wanted to replace freehold requirements with taxpaying or personal-property qualifications. A central argument for limiting the franchise was the equation of property with independence and the right to vote. “Admit this equal right [to suffrage],” John Adams wrote, “and an immediate revolution would ensue.”⁹

Of course, there were also those who supported an expanded franchise. They saw voting as a “natural right” that the state could not suspend except in extreme circumstances. Yet broaching the argument for a broader franchise was like lifting the lid of Pandora’s box, Adams argued in 1776:

There will be no end of it. New claims will arise. Women will demand a vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their rights not enough attended to, and every man, who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any other in all acts of state.¹⁰

After the Civil War, conflicts over the right to vote heightened dramatically. “For the next seventy years,” notes Keyssar, “the issue was often on center stage, and always backstage, in American political life. Heated public debates surrounded the post-Civil War enfranchisement

of African Americans, as well as their disfranchisement a generation later.”¹¹ Only in the 1960s did the United States cross the final frontiers of universal adult suffrage.

In the United Kingdom, franchise expansion lagged behind that in the United States, but the path to universal suffrage was equally tortuous.

In sharp contrast to the Western slow-walk of incrementalism, India made a giant political leap, vaulting straight into universal adult suffrage with none of the intervening contestations or conflicts.

The 1832 passage of the First Reform Acts (there were separate laws for England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, respectively) was itself the result of a long political battle. There were three Reform Bills dating back to 1830; only on the third try was final passage secured. The debate extended still farther back, into the 1820s. A government (led by the hero of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington, as prime minister) had fallen over the issue, and there had been widespread protests. The

1832 law raised the number of individuals across the whole of the United Kingdom who had the right to vote from 500,000 males to 813,000 males, thereby increasing the share of voters (still an exclusively male group) in the overall population from 3.6 to 5.8 percent, or 18 percent of the adult-male population. The Second Reform Act, which passed in 1867, boosted that figure to 32 percent. In 1918, late in the First World War, Parliament extended the franchise to women age 30 and over who could meet minimal property qualifications, as well as all men 21 and over. Ten years after that, all women 21 and over received the right to vote.

The processes of incremental suffrage expansion in these countries—taking decades and spanning centuries—had a major impact on the development of their respective political systems. The question of who could or should vote changed the priorities of elected governments. As new priorities arose, public institutions and capacities had to be created or overhauled to suit them. With these new or remodeled institutions came issues related to accountability: Were these institutions doing a good job of delivering on government priorities? Did those priorities match those of the existing voters? And what could voters do to hold both governments and other public institutions answerable, not only at election time, but all the time? Contests over suffrage extension also taught different classes and groups profound lessons in the areas of mobilization, collective action, and political competition. All manner of groups—the propertied and privileged, the middle classes, the poor and marginalized, and various minorities—learned to forge alliances and reach accommodations in service of their respective goals.

What we see today in these societies is the complex ecosystem of parties, public institutions, and political processes supporting democracy. Each system reflects the cumulative outcome forged by the conflicts and battles that revolved around the suffrage issue as the universal right to vote inched its way toward realization. Because universal suffrage was so slow in coming, state capacities also had a chance to develop slowly, without being overwhelmed by the sudden pressure of urgent mass demands. Instead, popular demands evolved more gradually, in pace with the spread of the franchise.

The Great Leap

In sharp contrast to the Western slow-walk of incrementalism, India made a giant political leap, vaulting straight into universal adult suffrage with none of the intervening contestations or conflicts. During the final decades of British rule, only a small share of the populace—never more than 12 percent—had received the right to vote, and then only in local and provincial elections.¹²

Under the British, only two large-scale elections had taken place. The first had occurred in 1937 to choose legislative bodies for eleven provinces of British India. The second had come in 1945–46, just a year before independence, and had been significant because it had chosen the provincial assemblies that would in turn choose the members of the Constituent Assembly. This body not only would draft the Constitution, but would also form the basis of India's interim government after the British withdrawal. In the "princely" states—which held about a fourth of India's population and where the British had ruled indirectly through local monarchs—there had never been any elections of any kind.

Against this background of almost no voting, the practice of regular elections in which nearly all could cast a ballot had by the early 1950s become universal across the Republic of India (Pakistan, the other child of the 1947 partition that accompanied independence, is another story). The transition came with jaw-dropping speed: Before Indians could even get used to the idea of elections, they were going to the polls regularly to fill numerous national and state legislative seats.

From one standpoint, universal suffrage's rapid advent appears unsurprising. Well before independence, the freedom movement's leaders had committed themselves to the idea. The 299-member Constituent Assembly, which deliberated for three years starting in 1946, saw only a muted debate on the topic, with no more than a handful of members opposed.¹³ From another standpoint, however, there was ample ground for surprise. In many other countries, after all, every step on the path toward universal suffrage had been dogged by conflicts that were intense and sometimes even violent. Why was there so little stir in India? Perhaps it was the unbending support for universal voting expressed by

such towering figures as Jawaharlal Nehru, who would serve as prime minister from 1947 until his death in 1964, and B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who chaired the Constituent Assembly’s drafting committee and became independent India’s first law minister.¹⁴

Independent India’s first general election, which took place from October 1951 to February 1952, has been hailed as one of the most impressive democratic spectacles in history. It featured the largest voter turnout that the world had ever seen. There were 173 million eligible voters, and 81 million of them cast ballots. Indians of every class and creed, including a very large number of the poor, took part.¹⁵ The successful holding of this vote marked two watersheds. First, the process of nation-building began in a newly serious way. The freedom movement had touched millions of Indians, but this concrete display of the right to vote in the hands of every adult touched millions more, bringing the idea of the nation to life as never before. Everyone, even the poorest, had a voice. The ideals of the freedom movement had unfolded with a new fullness, setting a capstone atop the movement’s momentous achievement.

Second, the acknowledgment of electoral equality among all adult Indians, irrespective of class, caste, or community, was an entirely new experience for a society beset by historically entrenched inequalities. In the polling booth, even those on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder were equal to the rich and privileged.¹⁶ And those seeking to rule India had to court the country’s poorest, most marginalized, and most geographically remote social groups, who thereby gained a purchase on public life and a degree of political agency such as they had never known.

As of 2017, India has held sixteen national elections. There have also been 362 state elections and thousands of local ballotings. Across them all, billions of votes have been cast, as generations of Indians have come together to acknowledge the binding force of what Dahl called their “national ideology” of government by the consent of the governed. Could a slow and gradual process of suffrage expansion have brought about such an impressive implantation of democracy at the heart of national identity? It seems doubtful, to say the least.

Voting, while critical, is of course hardly the whole of the democratic process or of democratic governance. Once the polls have closed and the ballots have been tallied, India has struggled to deliver on other aspects of democracy for its citizens. In November 1949, at the third and final reading of the proposed Constitution, Ambedkar famously said:

We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life.¹⁷

Gaps in India’s realization of democracy still dog the country today.

As Ashutosh Varshney writes, “India’s continuing electoral vibrancy coexists with some democratic inadequacies, especially between elections. . . . The two most important deficits are the commitment to freedom of expression and the belief in the equality of citizens.”¹⁸ In view

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of this, one is tempted to rewrite Dahl’s proposition: It is *electoral* democracy, not democracy as such, that has become the national ideology of Indians. Ambedkar’s vision remains unfulfilled.

Just as incremental suffrage extension shaped the political systems of those countries where it was the rule, so has instant universal suffrage had a unique impact on India. Starting points matter, and political systems the world over tend to evolve in path-dependent ways.

In our view, instant universal suffrage has weakened the capacity of India’s public institutions. The challenges of nation-building in 1947 and beyond—enduring the massive violence and population displacements of partition, stitching the various princely states into the fabric of the Union, writing and ratifying the Constitution, setting up state governments, surviving wars with China and Pakistan, coping with insurgencies—put a premium on the design and functioning of *national* institutions. So much energy and attention went into getting those right that public institutions at the state and local levels inevitably got short shrift.

More broadly speaking, instant universal suffrage helped to cause not only a deficit of state capacity but also a deficit of state accountability. The two deficits are related. We can see how this is so when we reflect that strong demand-side pressures for accountability tend to promote state capacity, while strong state capacities can make it easier to fix failures of accountability when citizen demands emerge. When both capacity and accountability are weak, however, the state finds itself doubly hampered when it comes to delivering on its obligations.

Weak state accountability. The conditions surrounding the formation of India’s public institutions were tailor-made for weak accountability. India’s bureaucracy at all levels was a continuation of the British Raj. It was more a machine for keeping order than an instrument of development attuned to citizens’ demands. In 1947, moreover, barely 18 percent of Indian voters were literate. People could vote, but grasping how government worked and laying out coherent demands were large early challenges. The demand for government to be accountable to the broad populace failed to receive the steady airing that it deserved.

Weak state capacity. With so much emphasis going to national projects and the task of consolidating power at the center, governance capacities in the states suffered. Especially hard-hit were efforts to provide public goods related to education and health, for the 1950 Constitution had made the states, not the central government, primarily responsible in these areas. Another critical deficiency arose at the local level. Here, the source of the resistance was B.R. Ambedkar himself. A friend of robust governance at the central and state levels, he nonetheless retained a deep suspicion of rural *panchayats* (local governments). He feared that they would serve upper-caste interests because these castes had land and education and already dominated the countryside. In the Constitution that Ambedkar designed, therefore, local governments are mentioned only in a section that lacks the force of law. For decades, local elections were essentially nonexistent. Constitutional amendments establishing elected local governments appeared only in the early 1990s.

Ambedkar may have been thinking mainly of the countryside when he moved local governance to the back of the rack, but India's cities felt the effects as well. In the early postindependence years, urban India did not have enough of a vote in what was still a predominantly rural democracy to generate serious pressure for strong governments in the cities.

A regime of incremental suffrage extension would likely have empowered local institutions and built their capacities. A heavily upper- and middle-class electorate would have focused on local provision of public goods such as health care, education, civic facilities, and the like. Empowered, educated, and tax-paying elite and middle-class voters would have demanded routine and systematic accountability as well. With the electorate widening at no more than a stately pace, public institutions would have had time to grow and improve with a commensurate deliberateness. All this would almost surely have made governance more effective, but at the heavy cost to democracy of giving upper-caste biases and arrangements ample time and opportunity to cement themselves in place.

Yet all that will remain forever in the fascinating but unconfirmable realm of the speculative and the counterfactual. What actually happened in India was something different altogether. The Government did *not* receive time to build capacity gradually. Instead, it was expected to provide basic public goods right from the outset, and quickly failed at this overwhelming task. Seeing this, the upper and middle classes backed away, choosing private services and giving up the idea of demanding that government meet their needs in the areas of education, healthcare, transportation, or the like. The consequences have been major, and are ongoing. They shape public-service provision (or its lack) today, and will continue to do so into the future.

When we ponder the question of how India has managed to survive as a democratic nation, instant universal suffrage must form a big part of our answer. Yet instant universal suffrage also must bear much of the

blame for the lamentably weak capacity so long displayed by India's public institutions, especially at the state and local level. The incremental spread of suffrage—such as occurred in most other democracies—could arguably have laid superior groundwork for a more able state, yet at the cost of endangering India's very survival as a nation.

In the case of India, instant universal suffrage is not a mere historical topic, but has continuing consequences for the structure and functioning of the country's public institutions. The withdrawal of the middle class and elite from seeking public provision of such key public goods as education and healthcare, for instance, has made the emergence of a U.S.- or European-style welfare state unlikely in India. Instead, India will probably witness the creation of new "partnership" mechanisms driven by state obligations to citizens but premised on the provision of public goods through nongovernmental means, since the state alone will not be able to provide what is needed. These arrangements will still place fresh demands on state capacity, however. For even if the government itself is not delivering the goods, it will nonetheless have to be capable of establishing and enforcing such joint arrangements. Whether the Indian state can rise to this challenge remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. In Article 326, the Constitution states: "The elections to the House of the People [or Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament] and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage; that is to say, every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than eighteen years of age [changed to twenty-one in 1988] on such date as may be fixed in that behalf by or under any law made by the appropriate Legislature and is not otherwise disqualified under this Constitution or any law made by the appropriate Legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election."

2. Starting as early as the Donoughmore Commission reforms of 1931, India's neighbor Sri Lanka became the first place outside the Western world where instant universal suffrage was put into practice. But Sri Lanka was still the British colony of Ceylon at that time, not a sovereign state.

3. After the Second World War, most newly independent nations started with universal franchise, as it became the norm of democratic practice. But it was not so before that.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

5. Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 162.

6. Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 87.

7. Dahl, *On Democracy*, 162.

8. Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

9. John Adams to James Madison, 17 June 1817, Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6772>. Capitalization modernized.

10. John Adams to James Sullivan, 26 May 1776, Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0091>. Capitalization modernized.

11. Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 61.

12. In addition, the Imperial Legislative Council, an advocacy body serving under the British governor-general, had some elected members starting in 1909. Yet the electorate that chose them never numbered more than 1.4 million, a miniscule proportion of Indian adults at the time.

13. We are grateful to Rochana Bajpai, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for sharing her materials related to the debates on universal suffrage in the Constituent Assembly.

14. For Nehru's view of democracy, see Donald Eugene Smith, *Nehru and Democracy: The Political Thought of an Asian Democrat* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1958). For Ambedkar, see Sukhdeo Thorat and Narender Kumar, eds., *B.R. Ambedkar: Perspectives on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

15. For a brief overview of the 1951–52 election, see Ashutosh Varshney, *Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2013), ch. 1.

16. For a discussion of how equality prevails at India's polling booth, see Mukulika Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014).

17. Ambedkar's famous speech is reproduced in Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, *Modern India and Pakistan*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 345.

18. Ashutosh Varshney, "Asian Democracy Through an Indian Prism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 74 (November 2015): 923.