Democracy and Electoral Politics

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Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that our capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but our inclination for injustice makes democracy necessary. This contestation between the capacity for justice and the inclination for injustice plays out within each one of us, as it does in the workings of democracy. As a regime, democracy does not know the ends towards which it tends. It empowers us as equals but does not tell us what we are to do with that equal power. To understand how we wield this power and how we might do better, we need to take democracy and electoral politics seriously on their own terms. The writings in this compendium try to do so—they consider politics as worth understanding on its own terms.

This compendium brings together eight essays from the fortnightly newsletter Ideas and Institutions, and explores the nuanced interplay between democratic ideals and electoral strategies. From the intellectual legacy of Alexis de Tocqueville to the contemporary tactics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, each essay delves into how democratic processes and electoral politics shape, and are shaped by, societal values, historical contexts, and political ambitions. This collection examines the evolution of democratic thought, the impact of populism, the strategic adaptations of political parties, and the enduring quest for equality and liberty within the framework of electoral politics. It offers a multifaceted perspective on democracy, reflecting on its promises, challenges, and the effort required to nurture and sustain it in diverse political landscapes.

The first essay reviews Olivier Zunz’s The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville, an intellectual biography of Alexis de Tocqueville—perhaps the greatest thinker on democracy. Following the book’s lead, the essay, titled The Aristocratic Liberalism of Tocqueville, reflects on Tocqueville’s understanding of democracy—not just as a political regime but also as a social state—and how he interpreted history as leading up to the rise of democracy. The second essay, The Theory of Populism According to Pierre Rosanvallon, is another book review—of Pierre Rosanvallon’s The Populist Century: History, Theory,
Critique. What makes this book particularly interesting is that, unlike many others who equate democracy with liberal democracy, Rosanvallon places populism as a phenomenon that lies squarely within the history of democracy. He warns against “critiques and warnings that have been powerless to change the course of events” and calls for effective critique that advances arguments “capable of modifying an opposing opinion.”

The third and fourth essays dwell on two aspects of the Bharatiya Janata Party’s electoral strategy. The third essay focuses on the ruling party’s strategy of using welfare expenditure to target potential voters. It describes how the union government, led by the BJP, has combined direct transfer mechanisms with the need for cash and certain basic amenities. This approach has garnered it more credit for schemes than previous governments, and it has done so while leveraging resources of state governments, public sector enterprises and even private sector firms. The essay also offers a theory on why this strategy might have worked despite assertions by leading political scientists that such approaches usually fail in democracies. As is customary for such essays, it concludes with a warning about the limits of this strategy.

The fourth essay is on organizational adaptation that the BJP has undertaken to allow inorganic growth in the party. The party has welcomed lateral entrants, including opposition members, into senior positions, marking a shift from its traditional cadre-driven approach. This strategy, alongside mass mobilization efforts, underscores the BJP’s transformation towards becoming a hegemonic party, and their vision for sustained dominance. The essay also raises questions about ideological coherence and long-term viability in the dynamic landscape of Indian politics.

The fifth and sixth essays explore the possibilities of electoral politics in democracies, even when things may appear one-sided on the surface. The fifth piece offers a historical perspective and illustrates the journey of the Congress Party as one that appeared indomitable, only for situation to turn against it. The essay discusses the fluid nature of political power in India, highlighting the BJP’s current dominance, contrasted with that of the Congress Party in the pre-coalition era. It underscores the complexities of electoral politics, where questionable strategies play a role, but ultimately, the voters’ choice prevails. The essay points out that despite the BJP’s strong position, state-level politics remain competitive, and historical context suggests that political dominance is cyclical, with opportunities for opposition parties to gain ground. The essay cautions against assuming the permanence of any party’s dominance and reflects on the democratic ethos that allows for shifts in power based on the electorate’s changing preferences. The sixth essay gives a concrete example of this democratic possibility by examining the stunning comeback that President Lula made through democratic politics in Brazil.

The seventh essay is a review of Neerja Chowdhury’s book How Prime Ministers Decide, which examines seven pivotal decisions by six Indian prime ministers. It explores the complex interplay of personal choice, political pressure, and historical circumstances surrounding these moments. The review contemplates on what these decisions reveal about the interaction between the logic of political survival and the workings of deeper socio-political forces in India. It also briefly dwells on the craft of journalistic history writing.
The last essay in this compendium reviews the July 2023 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. This issue featured a symposium exploring the current state of democracy in India, and presents a variety of perspectives. Three authors argue that democracy is on the decline in India, and posit that democratic institutions and rights are being eroded. In contrast, two others present more optimistic views, suggesting continuity and resilience within India’s democratic framework. The review underscores the complexity of assessing democracy in India, highlighting differing interpretations of democratic principles and the impact of recent political developments.
Blaise Pascal writes in Pensées, “What a great advantage to be of noble birth, since it gives a man of eighteen the standing, recognition and respect that another man might not earn before he was fifty. That means winning thirty years’ start with no effort.” This is one side of the ledger of life. The other side is that when one gets such a start, great things are expected. Alexis de Tocqueville made the most of the advantages that arose from his “noble birth.”

In his mid-twenties, Tocqueville traveled to the United States to study its prison system. He got his family to finance his voyage and leveraged his contacts to meet the who’s who, including then president Andrew Jackson. He and his friend Gustave de Beaumont published the prison study. But his fame is owed to the other output of his time in America—the two-volume work Democracy in America, which is probably still the best study of democracy.

The Man Who Understood Democracy: The Life of Alexis de Tocqueville by Olivier Zunz is a new biography that gives a fair portrait of the man. Focusing mainly on the development of his ideas, Zunz’s book is essentially an intellectual biography. Tocqueville had a penchant for combining analysis with prophetic insight, making him a great subject for such a project. While one can never fully explain how ideas develop, understanding the context, the interactions, the methods, and the motivations can help us see Tocqueville’s work in a new light.

Never satisfied with simply recounting facts, Tocqueville tried to understand the real drivers of change. He observed, “One cannot ever be sure of all the facts.” So, he focused on what matters most for understanding. He shunned purely materialist explanations that were
beginning to become fashionable at that time, because he saw them as diminishing the element of human choice and oversimplifying the complexity of social phenomena. His most insightful work was on two phenomena—democracy and revolution.

Tocqueville saw the promises and perils of democracy. He prophesied that democracy is the future. While he warned about its excesses, he saw in the rise of democracy the workings of providence. Since democracy was not yet common, it took remarkable acuity to not just understand democracy but also to foresee its march that came many years later.

His fundamental insight was that for democracy to work, a certain congruence between liberty and equality is necessary. Like most thinkers until the early modern period, Tocqueville used the term “liberty” very differently from the way we use it. It was a demanding conception that focused on the freedom to pursue moral and material improvements within a well-functioning order. Similarly, when it came to equality, he emphasized political rights that enable an elevating equality that empowers people to raise themselves rather than raze others.

This insight also points at the risks of democracy. Congruence between liberty and equality requires considerable patience and effort on the citizens’ part. It is easy to give into the temptation to surrender liberty to pursue equality, as the socialists often advocated, or to preserve political inequality in the name of liberty for the majority, as the slaveowners in the American South demanded. As democracy strengthens the whole while weakening the parts, Tocqueville worried about the excesses of majoritarianism and soft despotism. He saw religion and voluntary associations as potential antidotes against these tendencies. At their best, they can, Tocqueville argued, cultivate the virtues and mores beneficial for democracy and create participatory structures between the individual and the state.

The biography shows that while he did read the federalist papers and other documents on the American democracy, Tocqueville developed his understanding of democracy mainly by observation, conversation, and reflection. His work on the French Revolution was done differently. Zunz writes that Tocqueville was quite puzzled by the seemingly sudden intensity of the revolution and the rise of the empire under Napoleon. He had experienced a similar cycle in the rise and demise of the Second Republic (1848–1852) and the advent of the Second Empire under Louis Napoleon. Marx described it, quoting Hegel, as history repeating itself as farce. However, Tocqueville experienced it as tragedy, deeply disappointed by the ease with which the republic turned into an empire.

Tocqueville did secondary research and considerable archival work to write a remarkable but controversial revisionist account of the lead-up to the revolution. First, he documented how there had been significant improvements in the situation of the masses before the revolution, which raised their expectations. As he put it, “he better the situation of the French became, the more unbearable they found it.” Second, he did not see the revolution as coming directly and spontaneously from the so-called proletariat, which most socialists had argued. He instead posited that before the French Revolution, there was an aristocratic revolution.
against the king by the nobility, who were being weakened by him. This progressed to a mass revolution through the spread of ideas of political philosophers like Rousseau. Third, he found that administrative centralization had increased substantially before the revolution. While weakening the powers and reducing the obligations of local nobility, local liberties had also got diminished. Tocqueville argued that the centralized administrative regime under Napoleon was not a creation but a restoration of what existed prior to the revolution.

While wary of revolutions, Tocqueville remained supportive of the French Revolution’s initial moment of unity, liberation, and equality. He did not share the sweeping rejection of the revolution that was common for people in his milieu.

Although Tocqueville sought coherence, there were contradictions in some of his positions. He promoted equality while supporting colonization. He wrestled with doubt while trying to reconcile democracy and religion. Zunz describes these carefully without either papering over them or offering presentist critiques. He also shows how Tocqueville tried to deal with the contradictions by obsessively revising his writings.

Tocqueville’s traits that shine through are perseverance, open-mindedness, and autonomy. In spite of many bouts of poor health, he traveled extensively and did considerable archival work to find things out. He seriously engaged with thinkers of different persuasions. For instance, his discomfort with the socialists’ role in destabilizing the Second Republic did not come in the way of maintaining some measure of respect for prominent socialists like Louis Blanc. He also remained independent of contemporary ideological factions. To the credit of his peers, his autonomy did not always lead to isolation.

For Tocqueville, intellectualism was not just an aesthetic enterprise. He cared for the practical relevance of ideas. He did public service in many ways—from picking up the musket to joining the national guard as a private in the July Revolution of 1830 (and again in 1848) to serving his local community and entering electoral politics. He achieved some policy successes and also became the foreign minister for a brief period. However, as the Second Republic fell and the Second Empire rose, Tocqueville became quite disappointed with active politics. He concluded that there was limited practical overlap between intellectualism and politics, but he did see potential for mutual moral enrichment. In a lecture, he defined the role of intellectuals in politics in terms of providing the larger framework for political life while staying above political action.

Tocqueville has received many book-length treatments—from the exhaustive biographies by André Jardin and Hugh Brogan to the philosophical portraits by Harvey Mansfield, Alan Ryan, Pierre Manent, and others. In spite of covering a well-covered life, Zunz adds value to this literature.

Zunz’s book is enriched by his efforts to show how Tocqueville’s ideas developed in conversation with his friends and associates. At crucial moments, he received support from others. From the dependable Beaumont to a dutiful young archivist who was crucial for the
research on the revolution, Tocqueville’s intellectual life was significantly shaped by interactions with these virtuous others. Great achievements are often touched by virtues. Perhaps the only major omission in Zunz’s book in this sense is the limited discussion on the role played by Tocqueville’s wife Mary Mottley. While Zunz does discuss her role in community service and in the family, some recent scholarship has described her as Tocqueville’s spiritual confidant, political advisor, critic and editor.²

Zunz’s familiarity with the details of American history helps place in context what Tocqueville saw and understood in America. Particularly useful is Zunz’s analysis of what Tocqueville missed or misinterpreted. For instance, Tocqueville visited at the time of the revival of evangelical Protestantism but saw the denominational fragmentation as a sign of tolerance of differences, and not the search for purity that was driving the revival. He also missed seeing the significance of the Industrial Revolution that was underway in America at the time. While one can accuse Zunz of expecting too much, the expectation is perhaps fair when imposed on Tocqueville, who saw plenty and understood better than most.

Zunz keeps moving the narrative forward without being waylaid by details that are not directly related to the major themes of Tocqueville’s life. This makes the book quite readable. In comparison, Jardin’s and Brogan’s excellent tomes seem excessive.

Tocqueville was born in an empire, lived through two constitutional monarchies and a republic, and died in another empire. But he was devoted to the promotion of democracy. He was perhaps the greatest of nineteenth century liberals, especially because he thought about liberty not in doctrinal terms but as something complex, demanding, and situated in a specific moral order. Although not easily recruited for contemporary causes, Tocqueville has a lot to offer us. The publication of this biography is as much an occasion to engage with his ideas as it is to be inspired by his longing for truth and his commitment to creating conditions conducive to human flourishing.
In an essay published in 1964, historian Richard Hofstadter coined the phrase “paranoid style” to describe a type of right-wing politics ascendant in the U.S. at the time. Half a century later, this is how historian Philip Jenkins summarized Hofstadter’s framing: “We are liberal; you are mentally ill.” Ideological adversaries often draw from the manual of psychiatric disorders for rhetorical support. They also tend to catastrophize the worldviews of their opponents. Such rhetorical strategies serve partisan purposes, but they do not belong in scholarly works.

This tendency to disguise derision as description marks much scholarship on contemporary populisms. When not doomsaying or diagnosing derangements, this scholarship critiques populisms by emphasizing the “liberal” in “liberal democratic.” Populists embrace such liberal critiques so hard that they break in their strong arms. Populists readily accept that they want to unshackle democracy from the alleged excesses of liberalism.

In his recent book The Populist Century: History, Theory, Critique (translated by Catherine Porter) Pierre Rosanvallon makes a departure from the genre of contempt-as-critique. Early in the book, he issues a warning: “Political life is a graveyard of critiques and warnings that have been powerless to change the course of events.” Effective critique, he insists, should “advance arguments capable of modifying an opposing opinion.”

Rosanvallon describes five key elements of populist political cultures.

First, a conception of “the people” that brings together varied forms of grievances and transformational ambitions to distinguish between “us” and “them.” The “them” could be
myriad “elites”, “foreigners”, and even those seen as “corrupt.” Unlike, say, class-based distinctions, this broad and malleable understanding of the people gives populists flexibility to make and remake the friend-enemy distinctions.

Second, a theory of democracy based on three elements—a preference for direct democracy (for example, glorification of the referendum process); a polarized and hyper-electoralist vision of the people’s sovereignty that rejects intermediary bodies like the press and aims to domesticate unelected institutions like courts; and an understanding of the general will as capable of expressing itself spontaneously once the “enemies” are defeated.

Third, the figure of a “leader standing for the people,” an individual who manifests a quality of embodiment of the people as a remedy for the problems of representation. The populists’ preferred form of political organization is a “movement.” This is partly due to the “nebulous character” of the people they claim to speak for and partly due to the role played by the leader. Movements seek to bring “the people” together in unanimity, while parties tend to be expressions of specific groups.

Fourth, an emphasis on national protectionism understood not just in terms of economic policy but “inscribed in a sovereigntist vision of remaking the political will and ensuring the security of a population.” Populism is motivated by a concern for sovereignty in opposition to forces of global “markets,” international organizations, and other powers that are seen as “vectors of the destruction of the political will.” Their policy demands tend to encompass financial regulation, trade barriers, immigration policy, and other policies seen to affect the exercise of sovereignty.

Fifth, political mobilization of specific emotions and passions related to a) making an increasingly illegible world more readable through recourse to simplistic narratives, b) rejecting certain incumbent regimes and power arrangements because of a feeling of disengagement or alienation, and c) seeking status and recognition to overcome feelings of being abandoned and made invisible. These emotions underpin the formation of “the people.” Rosanvallon hesitates to define a “populist personality,” but suggests that for any such definition, the decisive factor would lie in the register of passions and emotions.

Rosanvallon’s description of these constitutive elements is broad enough to allow for varieties of populism, but clear enough to distinguish populism from other ideal-types. He also carefully delineates the differences between populist movements and the regimes they create once they get power, and the differences and commonalities between left-wing and right-wing populisms, particularly in France.

Rosanvallon then turns to the history of populism, recounting three populist moments—the rise of Caesarism in nineteenth-century France; populist demands in several countries at the turn of the twentieth century; and the advent of populism in Latin America in the twentieth century. He identifies from this history certain contradictions that constitute the fundamentally indeterminate nature of democracy. These contradictions correspond to the
elements of the populist ideal type, because populism seeks to radically resolve them by offering one-sided solutions. For instance, they seek to overcome the ambiguities of representation by offering a leader as an embodiment of a united people. Placing populism within the history of democracy, Rosanvallon shows how the complexity, vagueness, and openness of democracy sometimes enables populist experiments.

Finally, Rosanvallon offers his critique of populism, focusing on some of its elements. Analyzing the history of referendums, he acknowledges their limited role, but also highlights the problems that their excessive use can create. By collapsing the principal and the agent into “the people” they dissolve responsibility. By offering a binary choice, they reduce the role of deliberation. On the issue of democratic polarization, Rosanvallon offers a thoughtful critique of the populist claim of the majority expressing the general will. He reminds us of two other forms that the democratic “power of everyone” can take—the power of anyone (anybody is capable of social representation), and the power of no one (power cannot be usurped by any group or individual). Rosanvallon also critiques the social analysis that opposes the 1 percent to the 99 percent, and calls for a more precise and accurate understanding of the social world. His critiques of these constitutive elements are accompanied by suggestions on alternative methods of addressing the underlying concerns that fuel them. The long and the short of Rosanvallon’s critique is that democracy is hard work, and populisms are lazy responses to this stubborn fact.

Rosanvallon then highlights the conditions under which a populist regime becomes a democratization—a neologism describing democratically elected regime consistently acting in an authoritarian manner. Populists, he shows through examples, seek to achieve irreversibility by changing the constitution to expand their powers, by polarizing and politicizing institutions, and by pursuing a generalized politicization of all epistemology and morality. In a way, these steps add up to a new founding that is difficult to reverse.

Rosanvallon sees a “populist atmosphere” in the world today, most clearly manifested in the politics of “rejectionism.” There is disenchantment with democracy and greater personalization of politics, as old parties are fading and individual-led movements are being formed. He sees in this “diffuse populism” the sign “that minds are available, open to the major themes that constitute populist political culture.” This also “results from the intellectual weakness of the critiques that have been addressed to populism, and from the absence of a sufficiently attractive political alternative to its promises.” So, what should those opposing populisms do?

As is customary for books on democracy, Rosanvallon ends by invoking Tocqueville. Tocqueville worried that in democracies, the notion of government was becoming oversimplified, as “numbers alone determined laws and rights.” Populism accentuates this tendency. Rosanvallon suggests that “democratic progress implies making democracy more complex, multiplying its forms.” He calls for reforming the relations between government and the governed to increase transparency, responsibility and responsiveness, and for defining the personal qualities of “good governors” required to establish a “democracy of
trust.” There is no fixed model, but there is, he writes, “work to be done on a continuing basis, principles to bring to life in new ways.” The effort to take the contradictions into account is the work of democracy. Doing away with them would distort democracy.

Written in his characteristic style of seamlessly integrating historical analysis with political and sociological theorizing, the book is a considerable achievement. Rosanvallon is uniquely well-placed to interrogate and locate contemporary populisms in the history of democratic experimentation. Over decades of scholarship, his exploration of the history and theory of modern democracy forms a unique perspective for identifying the changes to which populisms seem to be responding.

Even though it is a major force behind populist politics in some countries, the word “religion” finds only two to three mentions in the book. Such context-specific knowledge should be applied by those working on a country. For those trying to understand the populisms in their respective contexts, the book provides a useful theoretical framework rooted in a comparative and historical perspective. That is, after all, the promise of political theory—by understanding “the political” well, we will understand “politics” better.
Given the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) successes in many important elections, the party’s strategy for winning support is worth understanding. In this essay, we focus on one aspect of the strategy—the BJP-led union government’s use of welfare expenditure to reach potential voters. We highlight three aspects that have changed—Which benefits have been given and to whom? How have the benefits been given and publicized? And finally, how have the resources been leveraged?

First, the BJP government has prioritized giving cash and certain basic amenities while continuing many of the older schemes and sometimes expanding them. Among basic amenities, it has emphasized building houses, constructing toilets, and providing liquified petroleum gas (LPG), electricity, and more recently, piped water connections. The expenditure on housing accelerated in 2016–17. Between 2016–17 and 2020–21, its share in the total union government expenditure was more than double of what it had been in the preceding five years. The subsidy in the housing schemes is quite large, but relatively few people can get it. The scheme reached about 20 million rural households and 9 million urban households in five years.

Other schemes allow for a wider reach. For instance, under the rural component of the Swachh Bharat Mission, about 109 million toilets had been built by February 2022. A more interesting example is the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), which gives cash transfers of Rs. 6,000 per farmer household per year. The scheme started in 2018–19. In 2021–22, 110 million households received the cash transfer. The cash amount is non-trivial, especially in states where farmers’ incomes are low. About a quarter of the beneficiaries of this scheme were in Uttar Pradesh, where the average annual income of farmer households in
2018–19 was less than Rs. 100,000. The income at, say, the 25th percentile would be even lower.

**How Does Providing Cash and Private Goods Make Political Sense?**

Political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquite has argued that since, in democracies, a large number of supporters are required to win elections, leaders tend to offer public goods—that benefit a large number of people—rather than private goods, which the government can only afford to give to a fraction of potential voters. However, in India, a private goods strategy could also help. Due to fragmentation of electoral contest, a relatively small vote share is now required to get a parliamentary majority. In 1967, the Congress party got 41 percent votes, which won it 283 seats. In 2014, owing to fragmentation in the contest, a 31 percent vote share translated to 282 seats for the BJP.

The BJP seems to have segmented strategies for cobbling together this vote share, with the provision of cash and private goods being a key tactic in the electoral strategy for lower income households. This strategy costs less than a strategy that relies on private goods for creating the entire support base. It is worth noting that, according to CSDS-Lokniti survey, the BJP’s vote share among the poor increased from 24 percent in 2014 to 36 percent in 2019. While the critics focus on the shortfalls and imperfections of the schemes, the BJP does not need perfect implementation.

Provision of cash and private goods can also potentially overcome the problem of attribution. We should distinguish between what is directly attributed and what is potentially and contestably attributed to government. Private goods provision can be directly attributed to government. On the other hand, attribution for jobs, incomes, inflation, agrarian distress, etc. is quite contestable. The pandemic has provided even more alibis. Attribution for public goods is also contestable. So, taking credit or shunning accountability for such outcomes is a matter of political persuasion.

Second, the BJP government has made direct benefit transfers (DBT) the default mode of delivery. While the building blocks for this—Aadhaar, zero balance bank accounts and mobile phones—were substantially in place when the government changed in 2014, the system has grown a lot. In 2013–14, Rs. 73.7 billion in cash was transferred to about 108 million beneficiaries. In 2019–20, Rs. 2.4 trillion in cash was transferred to 706 million beneficiaries, and Rs. 1.4 trillion worth of in-kind benefits were given to 741 million beneficiaries using DBT platforms. In the pandemic, these transfers were scaled up. In 2020–21, Rs. 2.97 trillion in cash transfers were made to 980 million beneficiaries and Rs. 2.56 trillion of in-kind benefits were given to 735 million beneficiaries. In 2021–22, Rs. 2.59 trillion in cash were transferred to 735 million people and Rs. 3.58 trillion worth of in-kind benefits were given to 950 million beneficiaries. The huge increase of in-kind benefits was mainly for food subsidy.
For the ruling party, there are certain politically consequential features of DBT system.

It puts the beneficiary directly in contact with the government, giving it better control over the messaging around the benefits. It converts something complex and intermediated into something simple and direct by either removing the layers of intermediation, or by decoupling them from the experience of getting the benefit. So, it feels as though the benefits come directly from the union government. When the experience is direct, it is easier to give credit. Compared to 2014, in 2019, the union government got much more credit for the schemes than the state governments.13

Depending on the quality of implementation, DBT can help reduce leakages from the system, thereby helping the government reach more of the intended beneficiaries. Critics have argued that this comes at the cost of false exclusions. However, when it comes to such systems, governments tend to focus on maximizing overall performance. Political benefits would accrue to the government as long as the exclusions are only a small fraction of the reduction in leakages.

The DBT system also improves the government’s ability to respond to a situation like the pandemic. Earlier, crisis response was often followed by allegations of graft and leakages. As long as the direct transfer infrastructure works at the last mile (and it doesn’t always work well), the government can send benefits to those who need it without worrying much about leakage. In response to the pandemic, the government could quickly scale-up food distribution and send cash transfers.

Third, the government has tried to leverage the resources of others to fund the expenditure for which it gets much of the credit. It increased the states’ financial contribution in the co-financed centrally sponsored schemes. For a majority of schemes, the states’ share (except for northeastern and Himalayan states) was increased from 25 percent to 40 percent. The government also got public sector enterprises to help with expenditure in some of the schemes. In 2019, a Comptroller and Auditor General report noted that, under the Swachh Bharat Mission, seven public sector enterprises had constructed 130,703 toilets in schools, at a cost of Rs. 21.6 billion.14 While the government also used these enterprises for incurring off-budget expenditure for the schemes, this was eventually brought on the budget. The government has also nudged corporates to use their CSR funds for funding welfare activities that are branded by the union government, and to directly contribute to scheme funds such as the Swachh Bharat Kosh.15

To an extent, leveraging others’ resources has helped the government expand its envelope. In the last few years, the union government’s resources have been constrained because of weak revenue collection and greater sharing of resources with the states based on the Finance Commission’s recommendations. The union government’s non-debt receipts averaged 8.9 percent of the GDP between 2015–16 and 2019–20, while they had averaged 9.5 percent of the GDP in the preceding five years. Also, in states where the BJP is not ruling, leveraging the state governments’ resources for funding the schemes for which the union government
gets more credit is politically beneficial for the party.

Prima facie, it seems that the schemes are reaching many of the intended beneficiaries. The last two National Family Health Surveys, conducted in 2015–16 and 2019–21,17 show improvements in the basic amenities that the government has focused on. The percentage of population living in households that use an improve sanitation facility increased from 48.5 percent to 70.2 percent. The percentage of households using clean fuel for cooking increased from 43.8 percent to 58.6 percent. Percentage of population living in households with electricity increased from 88 percent to 96.8 percent.

While the overall impact of the BJP government’s economic policies is debatable, many voters, especially in low-income households, are likely to have perceived a significant improvement in what they get from the government directly. It is plausible that this has yielded some electoral benefits for the BJP. However, since politics potentially concerns everything in the polis, it is difficult to determine how much of the BJP’s electoral success can be attributed to this aspect of its strategy.

Looking forward, there are two challenges to sustaining this strategy.

First, there is a tension between the private goods-led strategy and broader developmental goals. To the extent that this expenditure is crowding out the supply of public goods and certain merits goods like education and healthcare, it could negatively affect long-term prospects for growth and development. As a dominant party, the BJP has to worry about the long-term outcomes.

Second, since the overall fiscal space is expected to be constrained in the next few years, and the recent budget has emphasized capital expenditure on infrastructure, the fiscal space available for private goods may be reduced. It would be challenging for the government to sustain such transfers, let alone increase their flow to give a sense of improvement over the past. The flip side of direct attribution for benefits is the potential for being blamed for their drying up.
On October 3, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government held a trust vote in the Punjab Assembly. It was a symbolic demonstration of strength by the six-month-old government. The AAP has alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been trying to topple the government by conducting another iteration of *Operation Lotus* in the state. *Operation Lotus* refers to the wide variety of tactics that the BJP uses to get support from legislators of other parties without running afoul of the anti-defection law. Perhaps the phrase was used for the first time in 2008, when the party conducted such an operation to form its government in Karnataka. ¹⁸

Such *operations* have intensified since 2019. In September, eight of the eleven Congress party legislators in Goa joined the BJP. ¹⁹ Since the BJP was already in power in the state, this did not lead to any change in the government. But the consequences for state politics are monumental, especially because this is the second such mass defection in just over three years. In 2019, most of the Congress legislators had defected to the BJP. Earlier this year, the Shiv Sena split and the faction with the majority of legislators took power in Maharashtra in coalition with the BJP. ²⁰ The BJP secured fewer seats than the Congress in the 2018 state elections in Madhya Pradesh ²¹ but was still able to form the government in 2020, when twenty-two Congress legislators quit and joined the BJP. ²² In 2019, another *operation* was conducted to dislodge the coalition ruling in Karnataka, clearing the path for the BJP to come to power. ²³

The BJP has emerged as a dominant party at the national level, but it does not enjoy dominance in most states. It harnesses its powers at the national level—financial advantage, control over enforcement authorities, the power to influence the governors, etc.—to deploy
pre-election and post-election tactics that help it secure or sustain power in the states. India’s constitution enshrines a federal structure in which the union government is much more powerful than the states. It has the power to impose President’s rule, reconstitute the states, regulate economic activities, and intervene in many other ways. It also has more fiscal powers than the states. So, national level dominance by a party can be quite consequential for gaining power in the states.

But it would be a mistake to take a purely legalistic view of this issue. The main source of power for a dominant party is the support it enjoys from the people. The BJP received 37.4 percent of votes in the 2019 elections. To interpret this result, we must consider the fact that the second largest party, the Congress, received 19.5 percent votes and that the BJP received more votes than the Congress party and the next six largest parties combined. Since the opposition is fragmented, even 37.4 percent votes translate into considerable power. In this unipolar politics that has emerged since 2014, the BJP is able to deploy many of the tactics because no one else seems to be enjoying the kind of popular legitimacy required to push back against the party.

The BJP has not just accommodated lateral entrants from other parties. It has also been accepting of other types of lateral entrants, giving some of them senior positions soon after they join the party. In the present government, other than the prime minister, there are twenty-seven cabinet ministers from the BJP, holding charge of forty-seven ministries. From these, five ministers are lateral entrants, and they lead ten ministries, including key ones like foreign affairs, railways, electronics and information technology, civil aviation, power, petroleum and natural gas, and housing and urban affairs. These include four former civil servants—Dr. Jaishankar (became a cabinet minister in May 2019, and joined the party a few days later), Hardeep Singh Puri (joined the party in 2014, became a minister of state in 2017 and a cabinet minister in 2021), Ashwini Vaishnav (joined in 2019, became a cabinet minister in 2021), and R. K. Singh (joined in 2013, became a cabinet minister in 2014). Jyotiraditya Scindia entered the party during Operation Lotus in Madhya Pradesh in 2020 and was made a cabinet minister in 2021.

In contrast, Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led BJP made little accommodation for lateral entrants. Among the many BJP leaders who held the positions of cabinet ministers in that government, only two could be placed in that category. P. R. Kumaramangalam had joined the party just a year before he became a cabinet minister. Arun Shourie could also be seen as a lateral entrant when he became a cabinet minister in 1998. However, these were exceptions and easily understandable in the context of the party’s cadre-based organization. Kumaramangalam was from a state where the party was quite weak, and Shourie was probably acceptable to the cadres because he had been an ideological fellow traveler of the party.

In the world of corporations, there are those companies that grow well organically—that is, by expanding their operations—and those that are able to grow inorganically—that is, by buying and amalgamating other companies. Similarly, in the world of politics, not all parties
are well-suited for inorganic growth. Distinctions of organization-types matter in all walks of life, as organizations compete based on the strengths of their own type while exploiting the weaknesses of other organization-types. These interactions define successes and failures in any competitive realm, be it business, politics, or any other realm of human association.

The BJP has traditionally been a cadre-driven party. The cadres are bound together by ideological coherence and an organizational structure. While there have always been conflicts within the party on certain issues—for instance, on the issue of caste, there are both traditionalists and modernizers in the party—there is some coherence to the party’s ideology. Further, there is an organizational structure in which members can find their place, with an internal logic governing a member’s rise within the organization. An influx of senior leaders from outside is unusual for a party like this. Giving such lateral entrants key positions in the BJP-led governments crowds out opportunities for members who have worked in the party for many years.

At present, four out of the twelve BJP chief ministers—Himanta Biswa Sarma (Assam), Pema Khandu (Arunachal Pradesh), Nongthombam Biren Singh (Manipur), and Manik Saha (Tripura)—are lateral entrants. It is true that the BJP does not have strong cadres in some of these states and would therefore have struggled to achieve organic growth. Still, it is a departure from the party’s preferred mode of mobilization and leader selection.

In this context, another major change that the party made was to capitalize on the zeitgeist following its successes in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, by conducting nationwide membership drives. The drive held in 2019 is said to have added 70 million members, taking its total membership to 180 million. While the veracity of such claims is difficult to verify, for a cadre-driven party to conduct such a large-scale membership drive in itself suggests a shift in the organization’s mobilization strategy. The BJP seems to have moved towards a hybrid of cadre-based and mass mobilization strategies. Thus, while the party cadres and members of associated organizations of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh family continue to play an important role, there is a conscious effort to directly mobilize a large number of members beyond these cadres. The party is also deploying, directly or through its surrogates in mainstream media and on social media, various strategies to continuously mobilize support at a mass scale.

Perhaps this ability to add so many new members, to pursue mass mobilization, and to appoint lateral entrants at senior positions stems from the same organizational transformation. The BJP seems to be transforming from a party built on an ideology to a party built for hegemony. The party seems to have a multi-pronged strategy to achieve and sustain its dominance, involving transformations in how its organization is structured, how it mobilizes support, how it interacts with allies and opponents, and how it governs. In a previous issue of this newsletter, I had noted how the BJP-led union government has used welfare expenditure to reach out to different sections of voters. The increasing agility in the organization of the party seems to be another aspect of its broader strategy to transform itself into a hegemonic party.
For a party founded on an ideology, such transformations need not imply abandonment of its ideological commitments. They might be adaptive responses to the realities of Indian politics. Since there are natural limits to any ideology, to achieve and sustain hegemony, a party needs to incorporate a variety of worldviews and interests and manage the contradictions that arise. It would be glib to say that all those who join the BJP automatically adopt its ideology or to suggest that ideology simply does not matter. While the lateral entrants tend to talk the talk to reassure the long-time party members, worldviews are not so easily changed. This comes across once in a while when one of these lateral entrants says something that is different from the party’s ideological line. So, it must take considerable organizational ability to maintain such flexibility and to manage the emerging contradictions in a party founded in ideology. The leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi might be papering over the differences, which may come out in the open later. Perhaps, in the coming years, the limits of this agility will be tested.

For now, these strategies seem to be working to a large extent. It is not easy for the Congress to rebuild in Goa or for the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. Although there are exceptions, rebuilding after such setbacks can take a long time. The organizational flexibility of the BJP to break its opponents and absorb the breakaway factions, to pursue relentless mass mobilization, and to take in a large number of new members, imposes a disproportionate cost on its adversaries, which include its former allies. However, these strategies do not assure continued success for the BJP. George Orwell once wrote: “Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible.” Many hegemonic parties have lost their dominant positions—from the Congress in India to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico. Like all parties, the BJP is also vulnerable to change.
Power worship blurs political judgement because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present trends will continue. Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible.

-George Orwell, in Second Thoughts on James Burnham

With the Congress Party’s victory in Karnataka, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) now rules in six states on its own and in nine other states as a member of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). At one point in 2017, the BJP and its allies ruled in as many as twenty-one states. The present count of fifteen states would have been lower had the BJP not formed the government in Madhya Pradesh through Operation Lotus—a phrase used for the wide variety of tactics that the BJP uses to get support from legislators from other parties without running afoul of the anti-defection law.

As the recent verdict from the Supreme Court on the change of government in Maharashtra underlines, the ethics and legality of some of the methods deployed in Operation Lotus can be disputed. What cannot be disputed is that since the BJP achieved dominance in national politics in 2014—a dominance it underscored with a second general election victory in 2019—the BJP has not found it easy to win assembly elections in most states. In many states, when a non-NDA party overcame the steep financial odds to run an effective campaign, it defeated the BJP or came close to doing so. Further, in many states, non-NDA parties have been able to or are about to complete their full five-year terms in office. The effectiveness of Operation Lotus requires intraparty disputes and mismanagement in the party being targeted.
What this shows is that electoral politics at the state level remains quite open and that the BJP and its allies cannot take their victory in state elections for granted. Even though there is an appearance of the BJP’s dominance at the national level, the party’s all-out campaigns in state elections show that it does not take any election for granted (this includes local body elections as well). The simple reason for this is that India is a democracy, which in its most basic definition means that a plurality of citizens must vote for a party to come to power. In authoritarian regimes, the number of people whose support is required to stay in power is much smaller, and therefore the kinds of tactics that work to stay in power in those regimes do not work in a democracy. In a democracy, the electorate must be persuaded to vote for a party. And, if we accept a basic value of modernity, we must presume that people can reason about things they consider important. To the extent that electoral choices are important to them, people are making a reasoned choice.

A key issue here is the conditions under which opposition parties solicit support from voters, during and between elections. For instance, the BJP seems to enjoy a significant financial advantage because its national dominance allows it to raise many more resources than other parties. Purely strategic behavior by donors would predict much higher donations for a dominant party. Beyond campaign resources, the BJP also has more to offer by way of power and position to potential candidates, making it easier for the party to grow and also to launch Operation Lotus. While legal and ethical critiques of the means of politics are important, it is also important to place things in a comparative perspective, especially when one is trying to assess the political possibilities. All comparisons have limitations, of course, but they can help put things in perspective in a way that a purely moral and legal analysis with abstract principles and laws as benchmarks cannot.

The BJP’s dominance at present is very different from the Congress Party’s hegemony, which extended nationally and in most states from the founding of the republic until 1966. Although the party never received more than half of the vote share in a general election, in three consecutive national elections, it won around three-quarters of the seats in the Lok Sabha. Its electoral power in the states can be seen in the fact that between 1952 and 1966 its share of the elected Rajya Sabha seats ranged from 72 percent to 85 percent, averaging 77 percent. Barring a few years in a few states, the Congress Party ruled in all the states.

The present political situation is more like the 1967–89 period, when the Congress Party was dominant for most of the time at the national level but faced steep competition in many state elections. The year 1967 was one of transition—non-Congress governments came to power in nine states, and the Congress barely achieved a majority of seats in that year’s general elections. In that era, the Congress party’s share of elected Rajya Sabha seats ranged from a mere 28 percent (in 1978–80) to 68 percent (in 1984–86). For a while, even its dominance at the national level was interrupted by the unprecedented opposition unity that took the form of the Janata Party government following the suspension of Emergency Rule (albeit the elections were held while the Emergency Rule was still in force). Thereafter, the Congress secured two successive thumping general election victories in 1980 and 1984. In the mid-1980s, its share in the elected Rajya Sabha seats also reached 68 percent. It seemed like the party was back to its pre-1967 glory.
But then followed a quarter century of the coalition era (1989–2014), in which no party could claim dominance in national politics. In the 1989 and 1991 general elections, the Congress was still the largest party by a considerable margin, but it could not secure a majority of seats. From 1996 until 2014, no single party received more than 30 percent of the national vote share.

That era ended with the 2014 general elections, in which the BJP received 31 percent votes but a clear majority of seats. In 2019, it received 37.4 percent of the votes and further increased its seat tally. The BJP can be considered a dominant party at the national level because other parties’ seat and vote shares are much smaller. In the Lok Sabha, the main opposition alliance, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), only has roughly a third of the seat count the BJP boasts.

A democracy governed by a dominant party appears very different from a democracy with no dominant party; in the latter, unelected institutions can more easily claim independence, and the legislature naturally becomes an important place for debate and bargaining to get laws passed and to pressure the government. In much of the contemporary writing on Indian politics, there seems to be a recency bias. Such writing tries to identify the possibilities of contemporary Indian politics by comparing how the polity functions now with how it functioned during the quarter century of coalition politics.

To the extent that comparisons can be made at all, the present era of Indian politics should be compared with the 1967–1989 era. Much of that era was marked by intense political activity. Opposition parties tried everything possible to “oppose, expose, and depose” the Congress party. The party in power in the union government—which was the Congress for most of the years and the Janata Party for three years—freely used the union government’s powers to shore up its chances. For instance, the constitutional powers to suspend a state government and to impose President’s Rule (Article 356) were frequently used, in most cases without a legitimate cause. In all, around twenty-three democratically elected state governments that enjoyed a majority their respective assemblies were suspended during this period. In 1977, the Janata Party came to power and suspended all state governments led by the Congress party. In 1980, when the Congress party came back to power, it again suspended most non-Congress state governments.

Other powers were also misused by the central government. Consider the case of bank nationalization. As I have discussed in a previous piece, during the 1960s, the Ministry of Finance and the Reserve Bank of India had substantially addressed the problems that had been cited by the proponents of bank nationalization. Nonetheless, the Indira Gandhi-led government nationalized the banks. This was likely done for political purposes—it gave the government control over resources it could use for shoring up the Congress Party’s political support.

A democratic political system should improve over time. So, the purpose of such comparisons matters. If the excesses of the past are cited to justify the excesses here and now,
they represent an abuse of such knowledge. Still, for the purposes of understanding what is possible, comparisons are useful. Despite the excesses of the pre-coalition era, the Indian polity changed. It gave way to the quarter century of the coalition era, which also delivered considerable improvements in the quality of life of India's citizens. Hiding within the era of the Congress Party's dominance was the possibility of a different party system.

As the most well-organized part of India's vast, diverse, and sprawling freedom struggle, the Congress Party enjoyed a considerable advantage at the time of the founding of the republic. Even the idea of opposing such power must have appeared daunting. And indeed, until 1967, there was little hope, as electoral power even in states was hard to come by. Imagine being in opposition in 1962. In addition to dominating the general elections, the Congress Party won all the state elections held that year, most of them with a thumping majority. Five years later, it lost nine states. This is because many opposition parties persisted against all odds. Similarly, think about being in the opposition in the mid-1980s. In the 1984 general election, the Congress party won more than three-quarters of the seats and secured fourteen times the number of seats won by the second-largest party. It also won many state elections. Yet, by the end of the decade, the coalition era had begun. Such is the nature of politics in Indian democracy. What has not changed through the many transformations of Indian politics is the fact that for any party or coalition to come to power, it needs the support of a plurality of voters.

A key fact to consider when thinking of the possibilities in Indian politics is that most voters are not aligned with any party. In 2019, the National Election Studies (conducted by the Lokniti Programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) reported that only 28.7 percent of respondents said that they felt particularly close to any political party. Of them, 41.2 percent said that they felt close to the BJP, and 19.2 percent said the same about the Congress party. It is therefore not reasonable to argue that the dominance in electoral politics in India is now deep-rooted. The voters can easily change their minds and hold anyone accountable.

The common sense of Indian political life understands these facts and nuances. So, when an average person is told that this is the least democratic time in independent India's history, it does not resonate. To the contrary, most voters probably feel empowered because they see that the party that rules comes to power by receiving support from a plurality of voters and is therefore always vulnerable. Most surveys show that a majority of respondents in India feel satisfied with the state of Indian democracy. Pew Research's Global Attitudes Survey, held in 2019, found that 70 percent of the respondents from India were satisfied with the way democracy was working in the country. Among the thirty-four countries covered by the survey, only Sweden did better on this metric, with 72 percent of the respondents saying that they were satisfied with their democracy; the median for the thirty-four countries was only 44 percent. Only 26 percent of Indian respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the working of democracy in the country, while the median stood at 52 percent.
Beyond these facts, the main problem with exaggerating the shortcomings and challenges of Indian democracy is that of values—it may breed despair about the possibilities of electoral success in Indian politics. Such despair can then become self-fulfilling.

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The Meanings of President Lula’s Victory

Suyash Rai | November 9, 2022

The return of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil is as dramatic as it is instructive. A prominent figure in Brazil’s politics since 1980, Lula first contested presidential elections in 1989, when direct elections to the post were restored. He won the presidency for the first time in 2002. In his two terms between 2003 and 2010, Lula delivered impressive performances. Brazil’s economic outcomes were noteworthy—significant acceleration in economic growth, low to moderate and stable inflation, sharp decline in poverty, and so on.

Due to term limits enumerated in the constitution, he left office at the end of his second term in 2010. At that time, he enjoyed the highest approval rating of any leader in a major democracy. But the 2010s were harsh for him. He was bogged down by corruption allegations, eventually convicted, and ended up serving twenty months in prison. His latest victory in the elections comes less than three years after he was released.

This drama of Lula’s rise, fall and rise again holds many insights for observers of developing democracies. This drama’s immediate setting is Brazil’s political economy, with the global political economy providing the broader context. While the historical and international context lays the ground for the choices to be made, political leaders enjoy some discretion in interpreting, communicating, and changing the direction of history, and in choosing a nation’s own path. For leaders, possibilities are usually open for creating new paths. This can be seen in Lula’s achievements as president.

Brazil was once a growth miracle. Between 1967 and 1980, its GDP per capita at constant prices (in purchasing power parity terms) grew by a staggering 6.2 percent per annum. After 1980, growth slowed down and remained low for more than two decades. It was a stunning reversal—between 1980 and 2001, GDP per capita growth averaged only 0.9
percent per annum. This period was also marked by high inflation. Brazil has a long history of high inflation, but inflation was particularly high from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Brazil’s economy seemed stuck in a terrible trap in spite of significant natural resource endowments and reasonably good human capital.

The episode of rapid growth had been achieved when Brazil was governed by a military dictatorship—the dictatorship lasted from 1964 to 1985—while the period of “stagflation” coincided with rapid democratization (in Brazil’s case, it was re-democratization). Many drew lazy associations between democratization and economic stagnation. But then, things got better even as Brazil continued to be a democracy.

By the late 1990s, inflation had been reined in. Brazil’s central bank adopted a policy of inflation targeting in 1999 to sustain this achievement. But growth did not pick up. Lula built on this foundation to take Brazil’s economy forward. It can be argued that the episode of rapid growth started in 2002, just before Lula came to power. However, Brazil’s best growth experience since 1980 was achieved from 2004 to 2008, when GDP per capita growth averaged 5 percent. Overall, in spite of a year of negligible growth due to the global financial crisis, GDP per capita growth averaged 4.2 percent during Lula’s eight-year rule.

This period also marked a decline in inequality and a sharp decline in poverty. Lula was fiscally prudent, and careful about macroeconomic stability. He did not loosen the fiscal purse strings even in the re-election year of 2006. Rapid economic growth was achieved while maintaining macroeconomic prudence. Poverty alleviation and a reduction in inequality were achieved without attacking the incentives for accumulation. Lula achieved this through improvements in the allocative and operational efficiency of welfare expenditure. This was accomplished by devising new schemes that were continued by his successors and emulated across the globe.

It helped that Lula took office during an expansionary phase in the global economy. However, such outcomes do not simply occur. They must be brought about by a country’s political economy. After all, the global economy had been expanding even before Lula came to power. For every country that benefited from and contributed to the global economic expansion, there are several that failed to do so.

Lula is a good example of how political leadership matters for delivering economic outcomes, not just because he delivered good outcomes, but also because he delivered them after many years of stagnation, and because the economy again went into decline soon after he left office.

The period since Lula left office has been tough for Brazil. From 2013 onwards, Brazil’s economy has been in a decline. So much so that in 2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the economy, Brazil’s GDP per capita at constant prices was lower than what it was 2010.
While the grand narrative arc for the global political economy in 21st century typically turns around the global financial crisis, each country’s experience must be seen in its own terms. Each country’s political economy has processed the period of expansion, the shock of the crisis and the subsequent recovery efforts differently.

Brazil went from a growth regime of near stagnation to one of rapid growth, with growth rate more than quadrupling across the two growth regimes. Such dramatic changes in growth regimes typically arise from changes in the political economy. Unless there is some new natural resource discovery, an economy that was essentially stagnant for more than two decades would not start growing rapidly without any changes in the political economy.

While there may be endogenous pushes for change, political leaders have to make choices to guide the political and administrative settlement to enable rapid growth. One key change that is usually required is to create conditions for making deals that enable growth. This involves allowing some discretion for decisions that promote growth, but require some deviation from the laws to create rents and to overcome state capacity constraints. So, rapid growth in developing countries is often accompanied by an environment wherein it seems like a “free for all”, with deals being struck all over the economy. There is an air of permissiveness that is amenable to growth but also breeds corruption.

In Brazil’s case, an additional factor was that the major driver of growth during the Lula years was the export of low complexity agricultural products and minerals. Growth based on exports of such products typically does not create political economy pressures for reforms that would enable improvements in more productive, complex sectors of the economy. Further, since these are rent-heavy sectors, growth opportunities in these sectors usually accompany rent-seeking that is not easy to curb.

In such a context, it was easy to question the means by which growth was achieved. Anti-corruption rhetoric and enforcement efforts gained prominence. It is easy to see the political incentives at work. When Lula left office, he was very popular, and his party colleague Dilma Rousseff won the presidential election quite comfortably in 2010, and again in 2014, albeit with a narrower margin. Whatever the facts about corruption may have been, anti-corruption enforcement became the main plank to take down this popular leadership of their party P. T. Rousseff was impeached in 2016 on corruption charges, and Lula was sent to prison. Jair Bolsonaro won the presidency in 2018.

The only saving grace was that this time democracy was not supplanted by an authoritarian regime. Half a century earlier, Brazil had seen democracy giving way to a dictatorship. At that time also, Brazil’s democratic government had delivered a reasonably good economic performance, which was not considered good enough by many in the civil society. Albert Hirschman put it in the context of Latin America of that time: “…ideological escalation may well have contributed to that pervasive sense of being in a desperate predicament which is a precondition for radical regime change.”
Corruption is an issue that makes people in civil society jump to a corner of signalling pure virtue, lest they be accused of being apologists for graft. When anti-corruption rhetoric is combined with enforcement by independent institutions, it becomes even more difficult to challenge it politically. Brazil’s politics endured a polarizing turmoil that continues till date, with anti-corruption enforcement led by independent institutions of the state at the centre of this churning.

Things were, however, not as black and white. Investigative journalists found that the judge and the prosecutor seemed to have colluded to convict Lula. This does not mean that corruption did not happen, but only that anti-corruption enforcement need not always be concerned with curbing corruption. It may be a political strategy to defeat one’s opponents. Those who did not see that anti-corruption enforcement was being politicized could claim that they were deceived. But, as Leszek Kolakowski once observed, in politics, being deceived is no excuse. Lula always maintained that the enforcement actions against him were politically maintained, but he did not launch an all-out attack on institutions. He continued to strike this balance even when he went to prison.

Lula’s experience shows the difficulty of achieving and sustaining rapid economic growth while holding on to political power in a democracy, especially one with natural resource endowments. But the story obviously does not end with his incarceration. Since his release from prison, Lula made a concerted effort to launch a comeback. The key to his return is that he saw, through experience, that it is the popular democracy of Brazil that could hand him his salvation.

What can be expected from his presidency? The circumstances have changed drastically. The rhetoric of the election campaign was extreme, and Lula campaigned as a left-wing populist, which is a departure from his politics. In the campaign, Lula equated his victory with the very survival of Brazil’s democracy—a common rhetorical device in anti-right-wing politics. He compared Bolsonaro’s supporters with Ku Klux Klan members and accused Bolsonaro of committing genocide. On his part, Bolsonaro claimed that the election was being rigged against him and called Lula a thief. The friend-enemy distinctions were being starkly made, with little common ground and room for compromise.

It is too early to say whether this marks a transformation of Lula into a left-wing populist. It could be that his populist rhetoric was only meant to counter right wing populism of his opponent. However, there are at least three aspects associated with the conditions in which he is taking power that would push him in the direction of populism. First, the extreme polarization of Brazilian politics at present may not allow much moderation. Different factions are beginning to see themselves as not just competitors, but sworn enemies. It is politically expedient to adopt populist rhetoric under these circumstances. Second, the global trend towards multipolarity and deglobalization support a populist turn in politics, which pits domestic interests against foreign ones. Lula has long held a strong sovereignist vision, wanting Brazil to run an independent foreign policy, but now this could be given a populist flavour. Third, if Lula is unable to achieve improvements in the economy, he would
have an incentive to rely on emotional populist rhetoric. Lula is taking over at a difficult
time for Brazil’s economy, which has been in decline for close to a decade. The fiscal
situation is fraught, with Brazil running large deficits even before the pandemic hit. Brazil’s
overall political economy continues to boast a predominance of low complexity, rent-heavy
sectors.

Lula exemplified prudent, pragmatic left-wing leadership during his previous terms. Lula
would have to summon all his experience and wisdom to find a way out of this present
turmoil and towards a politics of progress and common good.
In the foreword to a book published in 1963, John F. Kennedy described the American presidency as an institution that is formidable—it represents the “point of ultimate decision” in that system, exposed—it is at the “center of the play of pressure, interest, and idea,” and somewhat mysterious—“the essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer—often, indeed, to the decider himself.”

This combination of enormous power, multiplicity of influences, and the essential mystery of the decision often leads to intense debates on why a certain action was taken. As is often the case with events involving decisions, the same facts can be reconciled with multiple explanatory narratives, making the debates endless. In How Prime Ministers Decide, a career-capping work of remarkable expanse and detail, journalist Neerja Chowdhury offers descriptions of seven major decisions by six prime ministers—Indira Gandhi’s decision to call for elections in 1977, Rajiv Gandhi’s decisions to undo the Shah Bano judgment and then to orchestrate the opening of the locks of the Babri Masjid, v. P. Singh’s decision to implement the Mandal Commission’s recommendations on reservations for other backward classes, P. V. Narasimha Rao’s decisions (or lack thereof) that led to a failure in preventing the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s decision to conduct nuclear tests, and Manmohan Singh’s decision to enter into the civil nuclear deal with the United States.

Much of the book’s appeal lies in Chowdhury’s selection of the decisions she subjects to her detailed journalistic inquiry. There is no gainsaying that these were historic decisions. They also have an aura of mystery around them, as they have been debated endlessly since they were taken, and Chowdhury’s book contributes to these debates. Most of these decisions involved significant freedom of choice; from the outside, there was no obvious necessity driving them. There was nothing that directly compelled Indira Gandhi to call for elections
in 1977, Manmohan Singh to stake his government on the nuclear deal, or Rajiv Gandhi to reverse the Shah Bano judgment. They had a choice.

While we know how these stories end, they are still interesting because we may not know all the important details. And since we are talking about the political choices that have shaped the present, it is useful to know what went into their making. Chowdhury also presents new information and ties together different strands of information in novel ways. For instance, a reader will gain new information on the interactions that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh informally had with Rajiv Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi. Chowdhury ties together multiple causal strands that may have led to a moment of decision, provides a detailed account of the hours and days when the decision was implemented, and then delves into the afterlife of the decision.

The chapter on Indira Gandhi is as much about her decision to call the 1977 elections as it is about what she did to bring down the Janata Party government and make a comeback. Even though the Janata Party government had dismissed all the Congress-led state governments in 1977, thereby weakening the party’s material base, Gandhi deftly exploited the internal contradictions and conflicts in the Janata Party government to accelerate its demise. The account demonstrates her political adaptability, and the insight here is that such constraints cannot bind a truly skilled politician—they know how to work with what they have. Of course, there are limits to this political skill, and therefore, it is important to build a system of free and fair electoral contest.

The chapter on Rajiv Gandhi shows how electoral politics can allow a technologically modern outlook to exist alongside concessions to reactionaries, revealing a potentiality of our politics that has cast a long shadow. It is remarkable to read how deeply opposed Gandhi was to the idea of undoing the Shah Bano judgment; despite this, he did a volte-face in response to an outcry by a handful of influential community leaders. Then, to deal with the backlash, he orchestrated the opening of the locks of the Babri Masjid, a decision that started the chain of events that eventually led to its demolition. All along, he was also taking steps to modernize the economy through the introduction of new technology.

The chapter on V. P. Singh shows that even though his decision was one of the most important ones ever taken by a government in India, its main driver may have been the logic of political survival in the short run. Chowdhury shows that even though Singh did hold some beliefs that may have led him on this path, he had also expressed ambivalence about the efficacy of reservations as an instrument of social justice. Perhaps he would not have taken the decision had he not been so cornered. This phenomenon of the enormous power of the modern democratic state being exercised through decisionmaking processes that appear to be driven primarily by shortsighted, narrow, and even petty concerns can be unsettling for some. However, a leader might have a choice of strategies for survival, and the path they take does tell us something about their beliefs. This interplay between events and political becoming is essential to the lives of professional politicians. Singh was shocked by the extent and nature of protests against the decision, especially the self-immolations by students, but
the decision’s political irreversibility ensured that Singh’s mark on history would be long-lasting, even though his government lasted less than a year.

The chapter on Rao’s decisions regarding the Babri Masjid is insightful because it shows that at each point, he had justifications for his decision. At the same time, those justifications do not quite add up to let him off the hook because of the outcome they led to—the illegal demolition of the structure. At the apex level of politics, completely formal justifications can only go so far because there is a residual responsibility that cannot be denied: the responsibility to act creatively to preserve order. Still, it is not easy to pin the blame entirely on Rao. Others in power, especially the state government, were equally accountable for the incident; it was directly responsible for protecting the structure and had given a written undertaking to the court that it would do so. Of course, those who mobilized the kar seva that day are also equally responsible. Chowdhury shows that a day earlier, many people were openly rehearsing how they would bring down the structure. It is, however, also possible that the leaders of the mobilization could not control some of the factions.

While the chapter on Vajpayee’s decision on nuclear tests is quite a straightforward recording of the events, it is remarkable in how it records the long-term continuity that enabled the tests and their political and strategic afterlife. Chowdhury shows how, starting with Nehru, the nuclear program was kept alive even by those prime ministers who were otherwise making efforts towards nonproliferation. This meant that the capability was there when the political appetite for conducting the tests was found. Chowdhury also emphasizes how keeping L. K. Advani in the dark until the very last moment may have widened the rift between him and Vajpayee. She also draws a line between the tests and India’s enhanced stature vis-à-vis the United States in the later years.

Mannmohan Singh’s position was very different from the others because he had not achieved premiership by the dint of his leadership of the party. He had been anointed, and yet he took a politically risky decision, one that many in his own party did not agree with and one that alienated the leftist parties that had propped up the government. Political power is not just electorally achieved—it can also be constructed by taking the right steps within the party organization and the government. Even though he was a surprise choice for premiership, Singh had made himself appear indispensable, so much so that he could use the threat of resignation to bring his party around. That someone with no popular base could do this shows that even in democracies, there continue to be other sources of legitimacy and power.

In the narratives presented in this book, one can see the working of informal norms in the polity. From enlisting legislators from the opposition to represent the country, to the back-channel communications between the government and opposition, to the exercise of restraint in discussing the personal lives of leaders, there are many episodes that seem to be from a bygone era. While nostalgia is usually misleading, especially when it is built on selective memory, to the extent such norms really existed and have been undone, it is worth reflecting on what has changed, why, and what could be done to restore some of the norms. This is important because the informal norms in a polity underpin the working of formal
institutions, and the proper meaning of representation can only be realized if subtle informal norms blunt some of the sharper edges of formal decisionmaking.

When we read memoirs, autobiographies, authorized biographies, and other accounts based on the versions presented by prime ministers or those close to them, the sense we get is that the dramatis personae are making the world through their decisions. Emphasis is given to specific events, the responses they evoke from various actors who were party to the decision, and the efforts they undertook on their own initiative. There is a thick air of decisionism in such descriptions. On the other hand, when social scientists and historians write about these decisions, they tend to focus more on broader socioeconomic causes. Journalists, if they are so willing, are uniquely placed to find a middle path. They are neither insiders trying to elevate their own role in history nor entirely prone (or trained) to finding explanations in larger forces.

Chowdhury’s book is an example of such a middle path. The decisions studied are described in terms of an interplay between larger forces, which were typically represented by a small number of party functionaries, elected representatives, and civil servants, and individual choices by leaders, who often justified them by citing, sincerely or opportunistically, some larger forces, as can be seen in each of these episodes. It would be as wrong to say that the leaders had no choice as it would be to suggest that they had infinite choice. Instead, this book tries to describe how premiers decided from their perspective.

A key merit of this book is that it takes politics seriously on its own terms. By bringing external standards to a political decision, one can easily evaluate it without understanding it. While such evaluative discussion is essential to the exercise of political liberty, it is also important to understand that those taking decisions have their own reasons for doing so. In other words, politics has its own demands to make. The book does not take what Raymond Guess critiqued as an “ethics-first” approach to political decisions, in which one first develops an ideal theory of ethics and applies it to political decisions, evaluating them against the theory. At the same time, as Leo Strauss wrote, all political action has a directedness toward some “knowledge of the good.” So, when one describes a political action, one is simultaneously addressing the values that direct it. A careful description of the motivations and reasoning of those who took decisions can reveal the contestation of values involved in the decisionmaking process and why some of the values prevailed.

The veracity of the different facts that are woven together in the narrative depends on the sources, and in a work where much of the action happens behind closed doors with only a few people involved, there is no alternative to source-based reporting. The extent to which one believes an account depends on how seriously one takes the sources. New sources may revise or rebut old ones. Such is the nature of historical writing—it is always a draft to be revised.
ESSAY 8

Five Perspectives on the State of India’s Democracy
Suyash Rai | July 26, 2023

The July 2023 issue of the Journal of Democracy includes a symposium with five essays on the following question: Is India still a democracy? That such a question is being raised is not surprising if we consider recent writings about India’s democracy in the academic literature, journalistic accounts in western media, and the reports of democracy watchdogs. The general narrative that has emerged is that India’s democracy is in decline, albeit there are disagreements about the extent of the decline. For instance, The Economist’s Democracy Index suggests that even though there has been some backsliding, the Indian democracy remains in the same band as it was earlier, what they call “a flawed democracy,” which is better than hybrid regimes but worse than full democracies. But the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute now places the state of Indian democracy at about the same level as it was during the emergency.

Three of the five authors, Sumit Ganguly, Maya Tudor, and Vineeta Yadav argue that India has seen a decline in its democracy. The other two authors, Tripurdaman Singh and Rahul Verma offer a different perspective.

Yadav makes her arguments in three parts. First, she argues that India’s political elites have designed and used certain democratic institutions, such as the Parliament, the courts, and the election commission, and state agencies such as the tax department and the police, in a manner that undermines democracy. She suggests that the problems with the Parliament and the election commission predate the Modi government but sees a significant escalation in interference with courts and the misuse of state agencies since 2014. Second, citing the V-Dem data and some qualitative sources regarding attacks on and harassment of journalists, internet censorship, suppression of protestors and critics, restrictions on freedom of religion, and political violence, she argues that in recent years, political elites have eroded
democratic rights and liberties. Third, based on a survey of election candidates she conducted just before the 2019 election, she suggests that the BJP leaders are more to blame for these trends than leaders of other parties. Her survey found that fewer BJP candidates consider free elections as essential, oppose interference with the judiciary, support strong opposition parties in the Parliament, and support gender rights. Further, her survey found that more BJP candidates support a constitution based on Hindu beliefs and practices. Yadav concludes on a very pessimistic note, arguing that since political culture among elites and citizens has become “more coarse, more violent, and less democratic,” backsliding seems to be India’s future for now.

Tudor defines democracy in terms of five pillars: elections for the chief executive and legislature; the presence of genuine political competition; governmental autonomy from forces such as military elites; civil liberties (both de jure and de facto); and executive checks. She also emphasizes the importance of norms such as opposition tolerance, whereby political opponents are not treated as enemies but simply as political rivals, and forbearance, which refers to the limited use of legal methods to steamroll opposition, such as executive orders, vetoes, and filibusters. Citing data from Freedom House, she argues that while the formal institutions of India’s democracy have remained relatively stable, civil liberties have eroded since 2019. Tudor then cites several international rankings and news reports to support her assertion. She also argues that the role of Parliament and the judiciary in horizontal accountability has declined. However, Tudor ends with mild optimism, suggesting that the decline in India’s democracy is not irreversible and that the surest way to reverse the trend is through “the emergence of a genuine opposition party with well-developed organizational roots.”

Ganguly offers two sets of arguments to conclude that India is undergoing an “undeclared emergency.” First, he sees the use of non-democratic practices by governments under Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi as qualitatively different from that by the present government. The main difference, he argues, lies in the present government trying to “reconfigure the contours of India’s democracy,” while the earlier instances were “mostly tactical moves.” The present-day BJP, he writes, has “a long-term vision that seeks to challenge the ideological moorings of the Indian state.” Second, he recounts several anecdotes to argue that the BJP-led government has launched an attack on civil society, the press, and certain minorities. Ganguly concludes on a note of cautious optimism, seeing hope in recent electoral setbacks for the BJP and in certain recent acts of the judiciary in which it seemed to challenge the union government.

Singh suggests that recent years present more a story of continuity than one of change. He lists several constitutional provisions and laws to show that, driven by an overriding concern for national unity and socioeconomic reform, India’s constitutional settlement has established a state based on the centralization of political power and executive supremacy. Singh shows that the constitution empowers the center vis-à-vis the states (by empowering the former to create and divide states and to impose president’s rule), the executive vis-à-vis the legislature (by allowing the former to issues ordinances and to dictate when the
legislature is summoned or prorogued), the state vis-à-vis the citizen (by “hedging in and qualifying the fundamental rights”), and the party vis-à-vis individual legislators (through the anti-defection law). Therefore, whenever a party was able to achieve a substantive majority in the legislature, it “ruthlessly used state power to push its agenda.” Singh’s second argument is that even during the coalition era between 1989 and 2014, when no such majority existed at the center, a centralized and authoritarian style of leadership was being exercised in many states. This suggests that even during that era, the tendencies of Indian polity had not changed.

Verma makes three arguments to suggest that the narratives of the death of India’s democracy are exaggerated. First, looking at the present state of India’s democracy through a historical lens, he suggests that in many of the arguments that the BJP has precipitated a decline in India’s democracy, there is a recency bias because such arguments are colored by the experience of the coalition era and a neglect of undemocratic actions in states that are not ruled by the BJP. Verma suggests that even the political marginalization of minorities is not a recent phenomenon. Second, Verma writes that the systemic changes associated with the rise of a new dominant-party system that is marked by “the decline of an old elite compact” and a high level of political polarization are being conflated with democratic backsliding. The BJP’s electoral dominance gives it more freedom to exercise power, and the high level of polarization makes it easier for the party to “adopt maximalist positions to counter oppositions’ maximalist stance.” Third, Verma reviews public-opinion surveys on how Indian citizens perceive the functioning of their democracy. He writes, “Indian citizens by and large support political tolerance of religious minorities, call out government actions they believe are wrong, criticize the BJP government for its rather average performance on improving economic conditions, and routinely vote out incumbents in state elections for poor performance.” Verma cites surveys that show that a majority of respondents are “satisfied with the state of Indian democracy” and that trust in institutions remains quite high. He shows that in the concern for democracy, there are clear partisan differences, with “opposition voters more likely to believe that India’s democratic norms are under duress.” Finally, he shows that the support for autocracy is mainly among strong partisans, regardless of the party they support.

The five essays included in the symposium show considerable diversity of viewpoints. Irrespective of one’s prior position on the topic, these essays will offer something new to learn and understand. But, having read these essays, I think the debate needs to deepen and expand further in a variety of ways.

There is a need to bring the conceptual and the empirical together in this debate. Only one author offered anything close to a definition of democracy before going on to discuss the question animating the symposium. This leaves a critical reader somewhat puzzled about the concept of democracy being considered in the essays. The fact that the authors did not feel the need to offer a definition and the fact that one author offered a definition but without considering the contestations around it shows that there is a particular conception of democracy in each author’s mind (and in one author’s essay), which they consider uncontested or even incontestable. Even though democracy is an “essentially contested
concept,” none of the essays engage with this contested nature of what is being debated. While a medium-length essay does not allow a detailed discussion of such conceptual issues, the authors should have at least mentioned these issues. The very act of trying to assess the state of a democracy makes one settle for a conception to proceed from, but it is important to acknowledge that there can be different conceptions of democracy, and one’s assessment of the state of a democracy depends on what conception is chosen. The implied conceptions of democracy seem to affect the way the authors interpret information. For instance, Yadav and Tudor uncritically accept the subjective assessments made by V-Dem Institute and Freedom House, which have been critiqued by several political scientists.

Implied meanings of democracy for each author can be seen in the emphases laid in each essay. For instance, in the three essays critical of the present state of Indian democracy, there seems to be a strong tilt toward a liberal conception of democracy, which is a legitimate perspective on what a democracy should be but is hardly incontestable. This can be seen in some of the facts cited. For instance, Yadav cites the fact that cow slaughter has been restricted as evidence of democratic decline. While such decisions can be critiqued on grounds of certain civil liberties, if the right to cow slaughter is assumed to be an essential aspect of democracy itself and restrictions on it therefore imply a decline of democracy, this would mean that such issues cannot be politicized in a democracy at all. Different citizens may disagree on what should be politicized in a democracy. Further, such one-sided and idealized conceptions of democracy also paper over the challenges inherent to democracy—for instance, majoritarianism is being presented as a symptom of democratic decline, but a tendency toward majoritarianism is inherent to democracy.

It is also implied in most of these essays that democracy is only a feature of the government and the ruling party. The three authors who conclude that India’s democracy is in decline mainly cite certain actions and opinions of the government and the ruling party leaders to arrive at that conclusion. Singh also focuses almost entirely on the government. However, democracy is also a quality of the larger polity within which the state operates. If we take a broader view, some of the facts marshaled to make the argument for democratic decline can be interpreted differently. For instance, both Ganguly and Yadav give the example of farm laws to show that the deliberative aspects of India’s democracy have declined. But, since the farm laws had to be withdrawn following protests, one can argue that those who felt excluded by the lawmaking for those laws were able to exert sufficient pressure on the government to withdraw them, indicating that they were able to have their say in the process, albeit at a high cost. To the extent one example can show anything, this might show the limits of the government’s power to sidestep the deliberative process.

A similar argument can be made about the electoral aspects of democracy; for instance, some of the authors argue that the BJP had used its state power to constrain the opposing parties’ ability to fight elections. However, the fact that the BJP has still been losing important elections should point to the resilience of India’s electoral democracy.
Further, if we consider the participatory aspects of democracy, we can see that voter turnouts have increased and that mobilization of the groups that felt excluded from certain policymaking processes—farmers in certain states when the farm laws were passed, Muslims against the Citizenship Amendment Act—has increased. Also, consider the fact that the principal opposition party, the Congress Party, held elections for its president for only the sixth time in its 137-year history. It shows that, faced with the BJP’s well-institutionalized machinery, the Congress Party is seeing the need for internal democracy. This is a positive for the participatory aspect of democracy.

While Singh and Verma bring forth an important and, in the present intellectual context, contrarian perspective to this debate, neither of them properly take on the following question: What, if anything, is different about the state of India’s democracy at this moment? Singh’s argument that authoritarianism is built into the Constitution of India can cut both ways—it can historize the present moment, which is instructive, but it can also make us lose sight of what is distinct about this moment. He does not specifically address this. Similarly, while one can see Verma’s argument that a dominant party can get away with more strident exercise of power, especially in a context of deep polarization, this does not necessarily mean that such exercise of power is not leading to democratic backsliding.

Much more work needs to be done to help us understand the present state of India’s complex and ever-evolving democracy. However, all said, the symposium is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on democratic backsliding in India and the world. By bringing together different voices, it gives the readers an opportunity to compare different perspectives to develop a more nuanced view of the state of India’s democracy.

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About the Author

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Notes


33. Ibid.


For complete source notes, please read this compendium at CarnegieIndia.org.
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