

Report &
recommendations on
low voter turn out

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Standing committee on Law parliamentary
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1. Definition of democracy

Democracy is a form of government which empowers the people by letting them elect their own leaders or administrators. Theoretically these leaders are to be elected by at least a simple majority of the adult population. This would then legitimize any Law they introduce or any decision they make as they have the confidence of the majority of the population. However the issue is, if the ruling party does not have the votes of the simple majority of the country then can we say that the government is making decisions according to the wishes of the majority?

2. Voter turnout in depth

Pakistan is one of the countries that have the lowest voter turnout.

The 2008 General election Figures are as under:

Area	Registered voters	Votes polled	Voter turnout	Votes polled for PPPP	%age votes PPPP	Votes polled PML-N	%age votes PML-N	Votes polled PML	%age votes PML
NWFP	10661212	3576523	33.54	695631	6.52%	462,274	4.3%	514786	4.8%
FATA	1280365	397,593	31.05	--					
Federal Capital	482801	2,41,531	50.02	71211	14.75%	106964	22%	45029	9.3%
Punjab	44500257	21442088	48.18	5943504	13.35%	5928123	13.32%	4418419	9.9%
Sindh	19506473	8612336	44.16	3598589	18001.4 4%	140312	0.72%	1023819	5.2%
Baluchistan	4365274	1367001	31.32	297551	6.81%	47374	1.1%	318928	7.3%
Total	80796382	35637072	44.11	10606486	13.12%	6685047	8.4%	6320981	7.9%

From the above figures it can be observed that the political party, Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP), that was successful in the 2008 general elections and is now the ruling government, only attained 13 % of the registered voters, Or in other words 13 % of the adult population voted for the PPPP. This means that any decision or Law or amendment in the constitution that this party has made has the consent of only 13% of the adult population which is 1/4th of the simple majority. This hardly justifies the definition of democracy.

The reason for this nominal figure is the low voter turnout which has been seen in the past general elections as well. In order for the system to run according to the wishes and wisdom of the majority, steps must be taken to increase the voter turnout.

3. Reasons of low voter turnout in the past

Since the countless interference in the democracy of Pakistan and the rampant corruption in different departments of the establishment, a common perception of the government being untrustworthy has been seen to be formed by the public. Resulting in people not trusting any decisions that the government or the establishment makes. In fact, the common man assumes that everything the government or any other institution connected to it does is a conspiracy against the interest of the people and in favor of their (the people in government) vested interests. This has also led to their loss of faith in the transparency of the electoral process. Due to that the public has stopped coming out to vote as they perceive that the voting process is a sham and the people who are supported by certain powers are the ones who come in the executive and legislature.

On top of that different mechanisms are used to deter or compromise the voting process. Among them are the buying of votes, bullying voters, sabotaging electoral rolls, relocating names of the voters at the last day, harassment of voters by the polling agents etc. The administration being of the same area usually is also sometimes accused of being biased towards a certain candidate of their interest.

The biggest hurdle for increased voter turnout is the unavailability of polling stations at walking distance and the unintelligent allocation of registered voters to polling booths. This mistake has once again been

made in the new computerized electoral rolls. In which many voter names are registered at a polling booth further than the one next to their permanent residence. This greatly discourages the already discouraged people and the people prefer not to vote at all.

Apart from this Pakistan having a literacy rate of only 58% (according to UNDPs report of 2011) has a large population which does not comprehend the power of a vote. They are too preoccupied with their present state to look at the bigger picture and consider its importance.

4. Recommendations

In order to increase the turnout the public's faith in the system must be regained. To do this, steps must be taken to make the electoral process more transparent and independent in order to satisfy the common man. The following recommendations are suggested in order to eventually achieve transparency.

- Electronic voting to be introduced, this would be checked and tested by the public in order to assure them of its authenticity and fool proof qualities. This method is being used in many developing countries, including our neighbor India. Bangladesh having a literacy rate of 55.9% (UNDP figures), which is lower than that of Pakistan, is also considering of using electronic voting machines after the successful usage in mayoral elections in Chittagong City.
- The creation of a photo voter list in order to identify the voter visually as well. This was recently introduced in Bangladesh, with the help of the UN, which helped reduce voter fraud. As a result of these developments the 2008 elections had the highest turnout, of over 87% and were considered the most transparent elections in Bangladesh's history. This greatly increases the public's faith in the transparency of the electoral process.
- In order to help out and encourage the voters the election commission should inform the voters of their polling stations by letter. This method was again used by the Indian Election Commission (EC), where the EC delivered slips containing the information of the polling station that the families' votes were registered to. As a result the voters did not have to interact with the

political polling agents in order to find out their polling stations, resulting the process to become more neutral.

- The election commission should be given administrative powers in order to conduct free and fair elections ensuring a peaceful environment. The Indian election commission has the power over the police and other administrative departments. Apart from that the Indian election commission has used its power to swap police forces between troubled cities in order to ensure the un-biasness of the police towards the election process. And it has also used the police force to keep a check on high amounts of cash movement in vehicles on voting days which are usually meant for the purchase of votes. In Pakistan **Section 9 of the Election Commission Order 2002** directs any executing authority to assist the ECP in any way possible, however this is not exercised
- Various methods are used by the polling agents of the candidates contesting elections in order to bully, harass, or convince voters to vote for their candidates. For this independent impartial election monitoring institutions must be placed on the booths that can monitor the voting process and advise people of their rights to secret ballot
- The polling agents are also reported to have subdued the polling staff of the election commission at times using the reputation of their candidate's street strength. For this the presiding officers must be educated properly about their powers which are enough to ensure their safety and transparency in the elections. And the police should also be made aware of

their (ECP's) powers in order for them to be the effective sanctioning force. These powers are mentioned in the **sections 6 and 8 of Election Commission Order 2002**.

- Motivation among people to exercise their right to vote via print and electronic media.
- Media coverage on polling station having troubled history during elections, where the area names are recommended by the ECP.
- Compulsory voting should be introduced in order to increase the voter turnout. This has been discussed below

5. Compulsory voting

Mandatory voting would ensure that the maximum numbers of registered voters actually vote. This is in direct opposition to the various devious schemes that have been employed to limit voters from casting a free ballot.

It further justifies and legitimizes the government that will be elected, as the majority of the citizens will grant it legitimacy via mass endorsement.

One of the biggest drawbacks right now is the costly election campaigns that the candidates pay for and the transport that the different political parties arrange in order to take the semi willing voters to their respective polling stations. Mandatory voting would bind the citizen to vote and thus diminish the need for massive campaign expenses.

Apart from that Mandatory voting would decrease the strong polarization we've endured. The far right and the far left would not play as large a role as the general electorate. And most importantly the common man would try to make himself more aware and active regarding key political issues and would play his role as a responsible citizen of the country.

- *Countries which use compulsory voting system*

The idea of compulsory voting dates back to 1892 in Belgium and 1924 in Australia.

Currently there are 32 countries with compulsory voting around the world. Among them are Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay, Singapore, Cyprus, Greece, and others. Of these 32 countries, 12 aggressively enforce their mandatory voting laws with penalties of varying kinds, including nominal penalties and small fees of as low as \$15, to the deprivation of government services or the freezing of one's bank account.

Australia is considered particularly notable for its mandatory voting because it is a large "mature" democracy. Australians have been required to vote in federal elections since 1924, out of a concern that voter turnout had dipped below 60 percent. Since then the turnout has seen to have increased, and the current turnout is in the 95 percent range for all eligible voters. When an eligible voter doesn't turn up to vote, they face fines of \$20 to \$50 and may face imprisonment if the fines remain unpaid.

- *Penalties*

There are different methods that may be used in order to oblige people to vote. Two of them are recommended by the committee below:

1. The Citizen who do not vote be penalized by a fixed amount or an amount dependent on their salary and assets,

2. The Citizen who fulfills his voting obligation be given a token of goodwill by the people of Pakistan in the form of food items or other monetary encouragements.

It is often argued that Pakistan has a wider lower class, therefore it might not be favorable to penalize people. However there are countries where the citizens were penalized for not voting while their poverty was more than that of Pakistan. For example Brazil, which had a poverty rate of 42% in 1994 (according to IMF) while Pakistan's poverty rate is 37.5% at present (Pakistan Planning Commission).

6. Conclusion

A country without a high voter turnout would mean that the government elected would represent only a limited group of people. Carrying on like this would not justify the real definition of a democratic system. It is essential for a system to be fully functional so that in future it can survive on its own.

Looking at the example of these developing countries we must move forward to make a better democratic Pakistan.