

EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE IDEA OF ELECTORATES - FROM 13TH CENTURY AD TO THE MODERN DAY DEMOCRACY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Mazher Hussain¹, Shahid Hassan Rizvi², Mian Muhammad Ahmad³

¹Lecturer, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur,

²Associate Professor, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, ³PhD Scholar, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, PAKISTAN.

ABSTRACT

In the true functioning of the democracy the electorates are the key players, destined to exercise their will, with their sovereignty to elect the members of the Parliament and assemblies. Thus, they play an effective role in the indirect mode of political participation, called the elections, by their right to vote called the franchise or suffrage. The mandate they give to their representatives, in turn, becomes supreme which accords legitimacy to the rulers and to the overall power structure in the country, and all the institutions have to play a subservient role of subordination to the mandate of the people. The Article in hand highlights the emergence and evolution of the idea of electorates from 13th century AD to the modern day electoral and democratic practices.

Keywords: Democracy, Electorates, Franchise, Electoral College, Political Parties, Constitution

INTRODUCTION

The observable fact of democracy, which results into such a regime in which those who govern i. e. the Members of Parliament, are chosen by those who are governed-the electorate, by means of free and open elections-a viable mean to ensue indirect form of representation, is purely and discretely a western notion. In western democracy, contrary to the ancient Kingships, the elector gives the representative a mandate to speak and act in his name. These representatives, in turn, constitute a parliament-the mandatory of the nation expressing its sovereignty (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997).

Elections, as one of the fundamentals of the democracy, are taken as the means by which people have to make political choices by voting for leaders and office-holders, with the key purpose to determine the composition of the government. However, as a matter of fact, real choice exists in perhaps only one-third of the states of the world (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997). The reason is that in many developing countries, and in those communist states that remain, elections are non-competitive i.e. no choice of candidates or political parties, and the electoral process exists purely as a legitimizing device, in order to demonstrate an apparent show of support for the government on the part of the population (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997). When elections are free and fair, and do provide an effective choice, they also perform additional functions. They generate respect for the political system by reinforcing its authority and stability; they confer dignity on the individual citizen through the right to vote; and they provide a line of communication between politicians and people, ensuring that the government is sensitive to popular demands and can be held accountable for its actions. The frequency with which elections are held, the selection of candidates and of those eligible to vote, the rules governing polling procedures and the methods by which voters' preferences are translated into seats, differ place to place and are conditioned to the prevailing political circumstances (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997).

EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE IDEA OF ELECTIONS BASED ON SINGLE-PERSON ELECTORATE

However, the idea of elections along with a single person electorate emerged in the mid-13th century A.D. in the Holy Roman Empire where the role of elector at that time was performed by a prince of the Holy Roman Empire who, in turn, had the right to elect the emperor (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997). Although the monarchy was elective by the 12th century, it was not until the contested election of 1257 A.D. that the number of electors was fixed at seven.ⁱⁱ These electors exercised considerable power at disputed successions by reason of their independence, though the imperial crown gradually became, in practice, hereditary in the Habsburg family.ⁱⁱⁱ

When the role of electors was reshaped, resultantly the concept of modern Electoral College was developed in the late 1780s. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005). Electoral College was basically a group of people chosen to elect a candidate to an office. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005) Probably the oldest College had been the one which met in Rome to elect a new pope, consisting of the cardinals of the Church.^{iv} The idea was adapted by the framers of the American Constitution in 1787, each state appointing as many electors as it had members of Congress. These electors in turn meant to choose the President of the USA. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005) As states extended their franchise^v these electors came to be chosen by direct election. With the emergence of organized political parties, the holding of a national party convention to select presidential candidates developed. Candidates, in each US state, were to be chosen beforehand by party associations and their vote was to be decided by their party's convention. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) Thus, for each state (except Maine since 1969), following a presidential election, the candidate who had won a majority of the popular vote in that state would gain all that state's electoral votes. In the event of a tied election the President was supposed to be chosen by a vote in the House of Representatives. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997)

ⁱⁱ They were the Count Palatine of the Rhine (Imperial Steward), the Margrave of Brandenburg (Chamberlain), the Duke of Saxony (Marshal), the King of Bohemia (Imperial Cupbearer), and the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne (Chancellors). The Additional Electorate was later created for Bavaria (1623-1778), Hanover (1708) and Hesse-Kassel (1803). However, the office of Elector disappeared when Napoleon abolished the empire in 1806. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997)

ⁱⁱⁱ Habsburg or Hapsburg; also called the House of Austria, the most prominent European royal dynasty from the 15th to the 20th century. Their name derives from Habichtsburg (Hawk's Castle) in Switzerland, built in 1020. The founder of the family power was Rudolf I, who was King of the Romans (1273-91) and conqueror of Austria and Styria, which lands he bestowed on his two sons in 1282, beginning the family's rule over Austria. (*Ibid.*)

^{iv} Roman Catholic Church, the largest branch of the Christian Church in the world, with over 1,000 million members, under the jurisdiction of the pope (the Bishop of Rome); in the early Church the Bishop of Rome, as the successor of St. Peter, exercised a limited measure of authority over all Christians with the East-West Schism of 1054 AD. However, his authority was restricted to the Western Church. Despite this, the Church and papacy reached the zenith of their international power during the middle Ages. At the Reformation of the 16th century this authority was diminished by the secession of the Protestant Churches. It was at this time that the term Roman Catholic Church came to be used, initially by Protestants as a somewhat derogatory term to imply that the Roman Church was at most one branch of the Christian Church. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997)

^v Franchise or suffrage is the right to vote in an election whose terms and conditions vary place to place as well as constitution to constitution. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997)

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ELECTORATE IN THE MODERN-DAY WORLD

In modern democracy, idea of electoral systems i.e. sets of rules for conducting elections was developed in order to materialize the modern parliamentary practices. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) Those electoral systems were meant to specify who could vote and how, which offices were subject to election and how frequently, the regulations governing campaigns, and how votes were to be translated into seats in a legislature. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997)

In some countries, such as Australia and Belgium, electoral participation is considered a duty as well as a right, and is, therefore, compulsory. In such countries, and in countries where registration is automatic, the turnout at elections is high. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) By contrast, in the USA, where voter registration is left to the initiative of individuals or political parties, turnout is exceptionally low (30-50 per cent). (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) There are rules governing the frequency of elections, whether local or national, as well as the terms for which certain office-holders may be elected. Electoral systems also specify certain campaign practices, such as limits on expenditure, access to the mass media, and polling procedures. The most important function of electoral systems, however, is to determine the composition of the government by converting votes to seats. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) Systems are either majoritarian or proportional. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) Preferably; an electoral system should help to create effective government, which is none the less acceptable in the eyes of the people. It should act as a safety-valve, allowing unpopular governments to be removed, and at the same time it should draw people into politics rather than keeping them out. ("Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia," 2005) In practice, however, electoral systems can only meet some of these requirements at the expense of others. For example, a majoritarian system may produce a stable government at the expense of minority parties who feel that they are not being represented, while a proportional system, which is more representative of the population as a whole, may result in unstable coalitions. ("Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia," 2005)

In most modern democracies, the franchise is an inalienable right which applies to all adult citizens over a certain minimum age, which ranges from 18 to 25. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997) This has not always been the case. Originally, where voting rights existed at all, they were the privilege of limited groups, who had to fulfill certain qualifications of age, sex, race, income, property, or education. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the franchise was gradually extended, this extension occurring at different times in different countries. ("Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia," 2005) First of all, working-class males were integrated into politics; where universal manhood suffrage occurred early and peacefully, as in the USA, it encouraged subsequent political stability. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997c) Women were the next group to be given the vote; this occurred first in New Zealand (1893)^{vi}, but women still do not have the vote in certain countries, particularly in the Middle East.

^{vi} Women's suffrage is the right of women to take part in political life and to vote in an election. Women's suffrage was advocated by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), and throughout the 19th century, in Britain and the USA, calls were made for voting rights for women. These were first attained at a national level in New Zealand (1893). The state of Wyoming, USA, introduced women's suffrage in 1869; in 1893 the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) combined two earlier organizations, formed in 1869, and organized state-by-state activity, and in 1920 all women over 21 were given the right to vote in the USA. The first European nation to grant female suffrage was Finland in 1906, with Norway following in 1913, and Germany in 1919. In Britain, as a result of agitation by the Women's Social and Political Union, led

The most recent general extension of the franchise has been in countries where the minimum voting age was lowered from 21 to 18. The extension of votes to ethnic minorities has been more complex. For example, even after the abolition of slavery in the southern states of the USA, Blacks, up till 1950s, were denied the right to vote through the imposition of unaffordable poll taxes to discourage registration, and through unfair literacy tests.^{vii} However, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s led to the prohibition of discrimination in voting, as well as in education and the use of public facilities. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005) Under colonial rule in many countries, like in Africa and Asia, voting restrictions, such as literacy or property qualifications, were imposed on ethnic populations, and universal suffrage was only achieved after independence from the colonial power. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005) Despite the fact that universal adult suffrage applies in most modern states, a right to vote in theory does not automatically imply a right to vote in practice; difficulties in registration often effectively disenfranchise certain groups, especially the poor and uneducated. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005) Categories of individuals not allowed to vote include convicted prisoners in penal institutions, the mentally ill, aliens, and those convicted of corrupt or illegal electoral practices.^{viii} In some countries, an educational qualification of basic literacy may be required, but in others special allowance is made for illiteracy in voting procedures. (*Huchinson Encyclopedia*, 1997c) In the UK, members of the House of Lords may not vote. (Duverger, 2000)

CONCLUSION

The existence of political parties is one the significant outcomes of the modern democratic system. Parties are a response to the emergence of the mass electorate. A political party being a permanent organization aims to occupy decisive positions of authority within the state, usually but not always through electoral means. However; in contrast to an interest group, a

by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel, the vote was granted in 1918 to those over 30 and in 1928 to women over 21. In 1918 the Irish politician Constance Mickiewicz became the first woman to be elected to the British House of Commons though, as a member of Sinn Fein, she refused to take the oath of Allegiance and thus could not take her seat, and later became a member of de Valera's Dail Eireann. In the years following World War I, women were granted the vote in many countries, including Germany, Poland, Austria, and Sweden (1919), and the USA (1920). The Roman Catholic Church was reluctant to support women's suffrage and in many Catholic countries it was not gained until after World War II; in France it was granted in 1944, in Belgium in 1948, while in Switzerland not until 1971. In Russia women gained the right to vote with the Revolution (1917), and women's suffrage was extended to the Soviet Union from 1922. In developing countries, women's suffrage was usually obtained with independence, and in most Muslim countries women now have the vote. Women still do not have the vote in certain absolute monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (where all suffrage is restricted). The 20th century has seen the emergence of some outstanding women politicians, for example Sirimavo Bandaranaike (b.1916), Golda Meir (1898-1978), Indira Gandhi (1917-84), Margaret Thatcher (b.1925) and Benazir Bhutto (1953-2007), although the proportion of women taking an active part in politics remains low. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005)

^{vii} Martin Luther King Launched a Movement for the Rights of Black community in USA in 1963. (“Oxford Interactive Encyclopedia,” 2005)

^{viii} However, rules and regulations regarding electorate vary according to the political situation prevailing in that area.

party seeks to form the government and not just to influence it. Originally, parties were little more than loose coalitions of notables, but with the extension of the franchise, parties had to develop a modern organization and a coherent set of policies in order to win electoral support. Parties exist in almost all countries, except where they are banned or suppressed. They may be based on ethnic, religious, or regional identifications or on differing ideologies. They combine specific interests into an overall political programme, they provide a link between the people and the government, and, if they succeed in achieving power, they reward their supporters and activists with government positions and, sometimes, with benefits such as government contracts. Political parties, whether they operate under one-party, two-party, or multiparty systems, are necessary for the creation of a viable government, and have become an indispensable feature of politics in the modern world.

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