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More than a marginal force

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Elections are quite possibly India's proudest achievement. Over the next few weeks, 700 million voters (more than four times the number in the next largest election — this week's contest in Indonesia) will have the option to exercise their franchise, under conditions that are mostly safe and free from direct intimidation. And while some politicians will try to make it otherwise, most people will vote in their own name alone. After the election the loser will congratulate the winner and promise (however disingenuously) to work together with the winner for the country's future. And that will be that.

It was not always like this. Ballot-box stuffing was common, as was voter intimidation. Unsurprisingly, the losers would often challenge the result. In some cases — most famously in Kashmir — the election did little to enhance the legitimacy of the government that it brought to power. But there has been enormous progress over the last decade, thanks to the Election Commission and the willingness of incumbent governments to give it a free hand. For India, where few government services inspire confidence, elections stand out as a remarkable example of state effectiveness.

Given this observation, it is ironic that Indian voters are not more enthusiastic about voting. In the 2004 national elections only 58 per cent voted. Moreover, the trend is not promising: In the 1998 elections 62 per cent voted, while in 1999, 60 per cent voted. In Uttar Pradesh, the biggest state in the country, only 48 per cent showed up at the polls in 2004.

One standard explanation for why citizens don't vote is that they consider it irrelevant to their lives. For example, it's often suggested that African Americans in the US have a substantially lower propensity to vote, as they believe, rightly or wrongly, that there's little point in privileging one white guy over another, given that both will ignore them post-election.

The problem in India does not seem to be about class or ethnicity: in the 2008 Delhi Assembly elections, the turnout was only slightly lower in polling stations located in slum areas (56 per cent) than in non-slum areas (58 per cent). In the 2007 UP Assembly election, turnout in areas with a higher-than-median fraction of Scheduled Castes roughly mirrored the state average. However, it is not hard to imagine that many voters — cutting across class, caste and religion — might be relatively cynical about the government's role in their lives, given the manifest evidence of government failure all around them. A different, seemingly similar, reason for not voting has to do with feeling disempowered. It's not so much that citizens don't want to vote, but rather that no one has taken the trouble to make the case to them that they should. The only people who ever ask them to vote are the politicians, who come around during elections, and less often afterwards.

Some evidence for this latter hypothesis is offered by the experience of several non-governmental organisations' (NGO) campaigns during the recent UP and Delhi elections. During the 2007 UP elections, Saarthi, a local NGO, carried out two campaigns in about 400 villages spread across 18 constituencies in the three districts of Lalitpur, Sitapur and Bahraich. In each campaign volunteers from Saarthi spent a day meeting villagers, followed by a puppet show. Each campaign delivered a simple and largely uncontroversial message. "Vote for clean candidates, corruption hurts everyone," said one; "Vote on issues, not on caste," said the other.

Since the villages where the campaigns took place were picked by lottery, we can infer the effect of the campaigns by comparing villages that were selected for the campaigns with villages that were not chosen. The results are striking, especially given the fact that substantially less than a quarter of each village was exposed to either campaign. Voter turnout in villages not chosen for the Saarthi campaigns

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was 54 per cent. Selected villages saw a 6 per cent increase in turnout. Interestingly, the two campaigns affected different demographic groups in different ways. The caste campaign invigorated male voters: adult male voter registration increased by 6 per cent in such villages. This was paralleled by an 11 per cent increase in male turnout. The effect among women was much smaller. In contrast, the corruption campaign enthused women, who increased their turnout by 8 per cent. In contrast, male turnout was unaffected by the campaign.

A related exercise was carried out during the 2008 Delhi state election, in collaboration with the newspaper Hindustan. Hindustan had the innovative idea of printing information about candidates running in a certain cluster of constituencies, each day in the run-up to the elections. Each profile emphasised both the candidate's background (wealth, education, criminal record) and, where applicable, some measure of his performance as an MLA — carefully put together by a Delhi-based NGO, Satark Nagrik Sangathan.

The programme that we studied involved distributing in 200 slum neighbourhoods around Delhi, 400 free copies of the issue of the newspaper containing information pertaining to those particular neighbourhoods. Preceding this distribution, a network of eight NGOs conducted a mobilisation campaign in those neighbourhoods. The campaign involved three days of door-to-door visits in each area, where non-partisan fieldworkers recited and handed out pamphlets delineating the roles and responsibilities of MLAs

Once again, turnout increased in the randomly chosen polling stations covered by the campaign. The magnitude of the effect was significant — a 4 per cent increase in overall turnout. The effect is smaller than in UP, which may reflect that urban voters are somewhat better-informed and/or more cynical. But the fact remains that even in a major metro, there exists a set of voters who were willing to queue at the polls because someone had cared enough to involve them.

What seems clear is that there are a lot of voters in India — perhaps more in rural areas, perhaps more among the lower castes — who are neither disinterested nor jaded (nor the shrewd, all-knowing, rural Indian voters of social scientists' fantasies). They are open, interested, and waiting to be included in the grand conversation about Indian democracy that is being carried out (as of now) on their behalf by others.

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