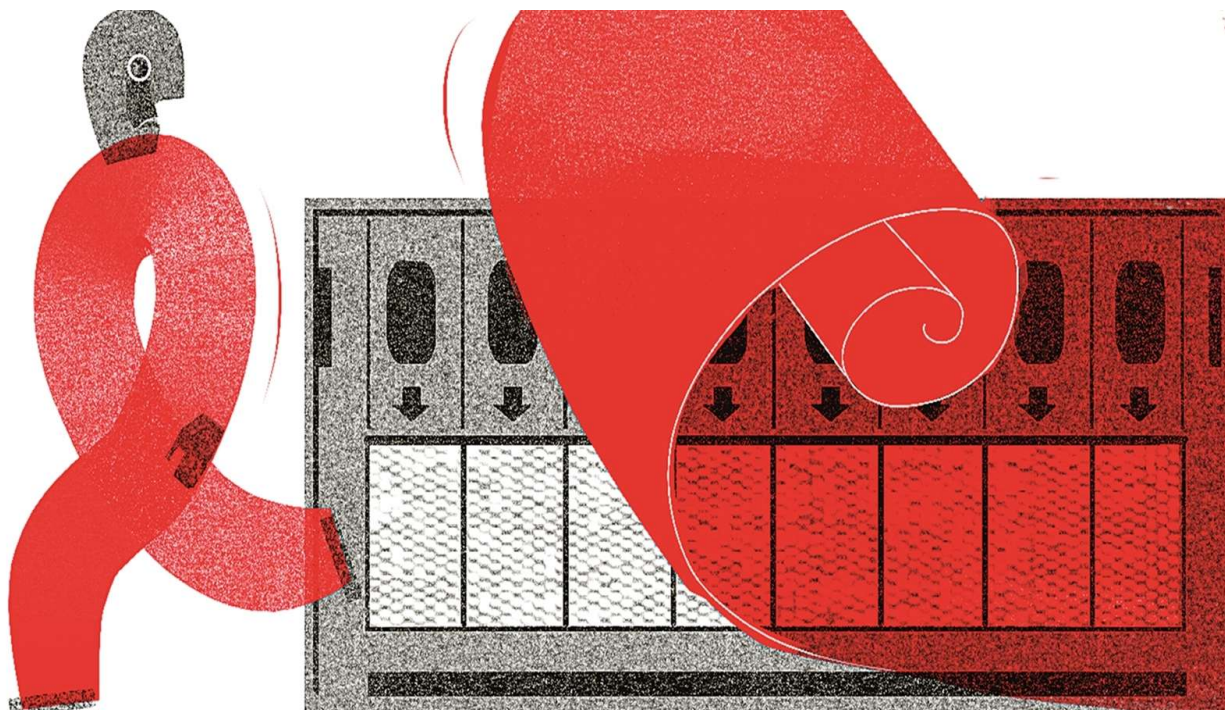


Some democratic lessons from Global South that our Opposition needs

The relevant criterion to think about the boycott of elections is not the extent of unfairness but the availability of spaces to expose this unfairness

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Yadav's central thesis completely disintegrates when confronted with the reality of the ballot box.
(Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Why bother with elections? Why not just boycott this increasingly unfair race? This question is being whispered around. It is time we asked this normally, without any tinge of taboo. It is also time we answered it calmly, without a rush of moral outrage. An open public debate may bring us to this conclusion: Election boycott is a good question, but a bad answer. As of now.

The debate should begin with “Why Bother with Elections?” — a question raised in the eponymously titled and defining book on the rationale of democratic elections by Adam Przeworski, a leading democratic theorist of our times. In his characteristic clinical way, Przeworski admits competitive elections may not offer the virtues we habitually associate with democracy — good governance, fair representation or social harmony. Yet elections are worth the bother as they enable deeply divided societies to live together without civil war. Those in power agree to risk losing office, and losers accept defeat because elections allow a peaceful transfer of power, or at least keep this possibility open. This is what the historic election of 1977 enabled in India, despite the preceding authoritarian interlude of the Emergency.

This happens only when electoral verdicts remain uncertain. When there is a realistic risk of the rulers losing an election that they are desperate to win. When electoral integrity does not fall below a red line. As it has in India today.

There is no objective way of measuring “electoral integrity”. But an influential 2014 paper by Pippa Norris, Richard W Frank and Ferran Martínez i Coma offers a helpful list of 11 dimensions in the entire election cycle relevant to assessing electoral integrity in any given country. Indian elections were always on the borderline in one dimension — campaign finance. Since 2014, our elections have gradually slipped below the threshold of acceptability in three more dimensions: Neutral electoral authorities, transparent procedures and fair access to campaign media. The latest assault of SIR and delimitation, along with the breaking of opposition parties now, crosses three more red lines: Universal voter registration, unrestricted party and candidate registration and fair boundaries of constituencies. Now we are left with the formality of a fair election: Fair electoral laws, standard voting and counting process and binding declarations of results. After the recent allegations of voter suppression in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh (2022) and Kundarki in the same state (2024), and the controversial counting in Rajarhat New Town, West Bengal (2026), this bare minimum, too, is under a cloud.

In sum, Indian elections, once the country’s pride and neighbours’ envy, may have slipped below the minimum acceptable threshold of electoral integrity. Not to put too fine a point on it, if the ruling party thinks it can and must win an election, it shall do so. That is why the opposition leaders face an existential question: Must they participate in a fixed match? No matter what your answer is, it is a real dilemma. It is a good question.

Yet, a complete withdrawal, a full-scale election boycott, is not a good answer for the Indian Opposition today. Here are three reasons to reject any such proposal at the present stage.

The first is an ethical argument. No, it’s not a naive democratic argument about participating in any and every election, even if it is rigged. The argument is about communicative ethics. A commitment to democracy imposes a requirement to communicate with the people. If the Opposition believes that the elections are being rigged, it must convince the people about it. Congress’s “vote chori” campaign has indeed had more impact on the public mood than is often admitted. Yet it would be premature to conclude that ordinary voters, even if we exclude those who are closed-minded supporters of the BJP, subscribe to this reading. Given the state of mass media, most of them are not quite aware of the extent of electoral irregularities. This may be frustrating, but a democratic ethic requires building public opinion to a point where the public demands it before contemplating such a step.

The second argument is strategic. Even when elections are unfair, it often makes more sense to participate than to opt out. On the one hand, global evidence shows that unless an election boycott brings down the turnout figures dramatically, it is an ineffective strategy against authoritarian rulers. Worse, it allows the rulers to claim that the Opposition ran away from a popularity contest. On the other hand, elections offer spaces. Even electoral autocracies have to cede some spaces to the Opposition to maintain a semblance of fairness. Irrespective of the results, elections allow opposition parties to recruit activists, raise funds, maintain party organisation, identify supporters and develop future leaders. For all its limitations, electoral participation is an opportunity to educate the public, to expose electoral manipulation, to document poll fraud, to shame and pressure the system and to prepare for future democratic resistance. It would not be prudent to give up this space.

For far too long, we Indians have exported democratic lessons to the Global South. It's time to import some democratic wisdom from authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries elsewhere. Based on the study of presidential elections in Belarus in 2020, Alyena Batura ('How to Compete in Unfair Elections', Journal of Democracy, October 2022) concludes that although the Opposition did not dislodge the ruler, they generated credible information about public opinion, recruited and trained democratic citizens, exposed the machinery of fraud and punctured the domestic and international legitimacy of the regime. The relevant criterion to think about the boycott is not the extent of unfairness but the availability of spaces to expose this unfairness.

Finally, we must consider a historic argument. Most mechanisms of manipulation fail in the face of a mass upsurge. In the 21st century, every ruler must preserve the appearance of popular legitimacy. This lip service becomes a constraint on the nature and extent of electoral manipulation. The current and rather low level of electoral integrity in India can inoculate the rulers against routine anti-incumbency swings, but not against a wave of popular anger. As we witnessed in Hungary recently, such a wave can bring down a well-preserved electoral autocracy. Indira Gandhi's electoral drubbing in 1977 serves to remind us that such a stunning reversal cannot be ruled out, however improbable it might look today.

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