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REPRESENTATION BEYOND ELECTIONS: CITIZENS AND POLITICAL PRIORITIES

-Yashasvi Nagar

INTRODUCTION

Representative democracy is based upon the idea that elected governments reflect the needs and aspirations of citizens. Elections serve as the primary mechanism through which people choose their political representatives and participate in governance. However, democratic representation cannot be confined merely to periodic voting processes. In many modern democracies, including India, people choose leaders they like, support parties they emotionally connect with, argue online, celebrate victories, and move on. But somewhere after elections, citizens often forget that democracy was never meant to start with personal likings and end at voting.



THE REPRESENTATION GAP IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

Every election season creates a familiar atmosphere. Citizens feel visible before governments are formed. After it the deeper question starts, does being elected automatically mean remaining connected to the realities of the people who gave that power? This is where the gap between participation and representation quietly appears. Realistically, politics can never become fully free from political priorities because parties exist to gain and maintain power and democracies function through political competition. Also, political institutions function within a very different environment. Once elected, representatives do not only carry public expectations, they also enter systems shaped by party discipline, coalition pressures, media narratives, electoral calculations, ideological positioning, and the constant need to maintain political relevance. Gradually, governance can begin shifting away from lived public concerns toward political management. The issue is not simply that politicians “stop caring.” The problem is structural and more complicated. Political survival often starts competing with public responsiveness. This creates a form of representation that is technically valid but emotionally incomplete. Citizens effectively engage in democracy through elections, yet still feel disregarded thereafter. In a democracy, people think every vote has nearly equal political weight, but arguments over the delayed delimitation of Lok Sabha seats have sparked worries that demographic variations across states are no longer being fairly represented in parliamentary representation. This means that the political influence associated to citizenship might progressively become unequal depending on location, even when elections continue properly. The problem becomes even more visible in large democracies like India, where social realities are deeply diverse.

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The issue is not simply that politicians “stop caring”. The problem is structural and more complicated. Political survival often starts competing with public responsiveness. This creates a form of representation that is technically valid but emotionally incomplete. Citizens effectively engage in democracy through elections, yet still feel disregarded thereafter. In a democracy, people think every vote has nearly equal political weight, but arguments over the delayed delimitation of Lok Sabha seats have sparked worries that demographic variations across states are no longer being fairly represented in parliamentary representation. This means that the political influence associated to citizenship might progressively become unequal depending on location, even when elections continue properly. The problem becomes even more visible in large democracies like India, where social realities are deeply diverse.

DEMOCRATIC DECLINE AND INSTITUTIONAL CONCERNS IN INDIA

The V-Dem Democracy Report 2025 implies that India’s democratic decline reflects a gradual weakening of democratic institutions rather than a sudden collapse. According to Freedom House, an international democracy assessment, India scores comparatively better in political rights than in civil liberties. The lower score in these areas suggests an important distinction in procedural continuance while citizens simultaneously experience increasing limitations in aspects of everyday public life. Elections provide legitimacy, but legitimacy alone does not guarantee responsiveness and measure priorities. Thus, the gradually expanding democratic decline in India could be said to be caused by the weakening of horizontal accountability. The case of *Indira Gandhi v. Raj Narain* remains one of the clearest examples of what happens when institutions meant to limit power slowly stop functioning it raised a larger question beyond one election dispute arising when institutions meant to limit power slowly stop functioning independently. In a democracy, opposition parties, courts, media, and public criticism are safeguards against political power becoming untouchable, as institutions that are supposed to monitor and restrain the executive, such as the judiciary and the Election Commission, become less independent and less effective. Therefore, the rise of democracy erosion in India is a result of institutional weakening.

CITIZEN DISSATISFACTION AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

For many citizens, politics stopped feeling like something they could influence and started feeling like something happening above them, beyond their reach. Democracy does not survive only through constitutions or institutions on paper. It also survives through public trust, through the feeling that people can question power without fear and still remain politically visible after elections are over. What made the 2024 elections significant beyond seat counts and campaign narratives was that many citizens were not necessarily rejecting power itself. They were reacting to the feeling that too much power was beginning to gather in too few hands. Even ordinary citizens who may never use terms like “constitutional balance” often instinctively understand when democratic space begins shrinking. At the same time, societies also develop a dangerous habit of adapting to dysfunction. Instead of demanding better systems, many citizens slowly begin measuring governance through adjustment. Media visibility too creates the image of strong leadership even when everyday realities remain unchanged. As a result, politics increasingly rewards the performance of leadership rather than performance in leadership. For citizens on other hand, online expression often creates the feeling of participation without creating real influence over institutions, or policy outcomes.

REPRESENTATION BEYOND ELECTIONS

Representation means carrying public realities into decision-making without allowing them to disappear beneath political priorities. Governance is complex and competing interests will always exist, but citizens do expect to feel that their realities still matter after the campaigns are over. That expectation is not idealism. It is the emotional foundation upon which representative democracy survives. Mechanisms such as the Right to Information Act gave ordinary citizens a way to question authority beyond elections. For many people, RTI was not just a legal tool. It became proof that citizens could still demand explanations from institutions that otherwise felt distant and inaccessible. Similarly, social audits, local governance meetings, and citizen-led activism create spaces where governance can be challenged, questioned, and monitored in practical ways. Digital platforms have made public participation more visible. However, online visibility alone cannot replace meaningful accountability. A society can become politically expressive online while still remaining disconnected from actual decision-making. Ultimately, representation is not simply about choosing leaders. It is about ensuring that public realities continue entering governance.

CONCLUSION

During elections, citizens often see political workers entering neighborhoods that remained ignored for years. Broken roads are suddenly inspected, public grievances gain urgency, and leaders become easier to approach. People recognize this cycle so clearly that many now joke about measuring elections through road repairs and banner installations. The real purpose of political power is not endless television debates, ideological drama, or loud political branding that changes nothing, at the ground level people need affordable living, safer communities, and functioning public systems, yet public attention is constantly pulled toward political noise that keeps people emotionally engaged but rarely improves their everyday lives. Over time, politics becomes less about solving problems and more about sustaining narratives, while citizens slowly stop demanding the very things democracy was supposed to guarantee them in the first place.

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