

Do Political Stories Change How People See Things?

AMAN

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shah Satnam Ji Boys College, Sirsa

Abstract- *In 2025, India's democracy, which was once regarded to be the greatest and most active in the world, is at a very vital and perilous stage. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report considers the country a "electoral autocracy" since it has lost many democratic liberties during the past ten years. Some of the most essential democratic rights that have gotten worse are freedom of speech, media independence, civil liberties, and institutional autonomy. This is like what happened in the past when there were authoritarian trends, such the Emergency era of the 1970s. The 2025 Bihar elections brought these issues to light, with many people blaming "vote chori" (vote fraud) and manipulating voter records to target weak groups. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Election Commission of India (ECI) both firmly deny that there is any political division or lack of trust, even though they have made technological changes to make things more open. People in different sections of the country have extremely varied political experiences. People in Haryana trust the democratic process and the government is quite stable. In Punjab, on the other hand, there is still social unrest and worries about the validity of elections. Democratization is further impeded by the proliferation of religion and social differences, institutional constraints on judicial and media entities, and the repression of dissent. Economic inequality and populist majoritarianism make democratic problems worse.*

Index Terms- *Autocracy, Democracy, Liberties, Institutions, Majoritarianism*

I. INTRODUCTION

India's strong democracy is reaching a turning point. Scandals about elections, like the "vote chori" issue, are happening at the same time as warnings from other countries that have moved away from democratic values. The opposition in India is angry about what they think is vote stealing in the Bihar elections of 2025. This is like how Chávez and Maduro in Venezuela terminated pluralism through judicial capture and economic misery since 1999, or how Vučić in Serbia consolidated hybrid government through media control and fraud by 2020. But the Election Commission of India (ECI) shows that it can

handle all of this stress by updating its technology. This makes it look like the system is under a lot of stress yet is still moving forward. Countries don't "leave" democracy all at once; they incrementally degrade it, like the arguments that are going on in India right now. Duterte's drug campaign in the Philippines from 2016 to 2022 led to killings outside of the law and bullying in institutions, which got worse because of populism. The opposition feels that when targeted voter deletions hurt minorities in Karnataka's Aland or Haryana families, they will lose votes. Venezuela became an autocrat when the ruling party stopped protests and party dominance amid times of escalating poverty. This is like what Rahul Gandhi said about duplicate entries making the Bihar rolls bigger during Special Intensive Revision (SIR). Serbia's decline included harassing the opposition and stuffing the vote box, which is comparable to Congress's charges of booth manipulation without Form 17C transparency. These events highlight how elected leaders use crises like economic troubles and anxieties about safety to make checks less effective. As India's SIR phase-II spreads across the country, this is a warning. Rahul Gandhi lit the fire by labeling the ECI and BJP's Bihar sweep (NDA's 202/243 seats) a "hydrogen bomb" on democracy during news conferences, wearing "SIR = vote chori" T-shirts, and marching with Kharge. Congress brought out weird facts like 6,018 deletions that targeted poor, aged, and minority voters, missing ballots in Haryana, and duplicate votes in Bihar. They wanted CCTV, digital logs, and sworn statements to show that fraud had happened. After the disaster, people who knew about it argued that too much attention on this topic led to the losses. However, they promised to take things to the next level through the Supreme Court and yatras, framing it as an attack on institutions like global backsliding. People who agreed with this speech were excited, but it also drew a lot of criticism for not having any actual evidence. This might harm trust in the same way that opposition slander do when they weaken regimes. The BJP said that "vote chori" was a

"joke" and a reason for Congress's losses. Shah and Thakur said that Gandhi was generating trouble like in Bangladesh to protect people who were sneaking in. They said that there were no concerns from Congress SIR and that the Bihar lists were clean after removing the names of persons who had died or moved away. They also said that help initiatives like Rs 10,000 for women helped them win. ECI hit back harder by calling the claims a "dirty word" that hurt workers, verifying bogus documents (like the Bengaluru double-vote doc), and issued ultimatums: seven days to present affidavits or apologize—no removals without notice. Former judges and government workers backed ECI and criticized "selective outrage" that didn't change the views of voters in Bihar or Maharashtra. This illustrates that legitimate worries are lessened by gaps in evidence. India's system is better than several others that are going worse around the world. It has an EVM efficiency of more than 96%, and teaching voters about it helps stop fraud. The best improvements for ECI in 2025 are that the ECINET app provides real-time turnout every two hours (with bye-polls first), polling stations are broadcast live, and final data comes in faster, which fixes delays that happened in the last Lok Sabha. Voter turnout was at an all-time high, and systems like Multi-Constituency Remote Voting assisted migrants by letting them vote at up to 72 booths from one station, which made the process fairer. Empowerment, fairness, efficiency, and ethics are the four key topics that reforms focus on. They build trust even when there is noise. Bihar's mandate indicated that voters cared more about issues than baseless cries. India's ECI is different from Venezuela's collapse since it asks for proof, which shows strength. The combination of scary events from around the world and India's split but improving polls shows how strong and weak democracy can be. If openness doesn't work, things could get worse. But new concepts like digital rolls and MCC enforcement give us hope and encourage everyone to work together to create improvements based on facts instead of splitting people up.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines the theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to democratic regression, election integrity, and public happiness with

democracy, emphasizing India and the regional contexts of Punjab and Haryana. It is divided into four sections: (i) Defining democracy and satisfaction with democracy, (ii) Examining worldwide trends of democratic backsliding and electoral autocracy, (iii) Analyzing India's democratic trajectory and popular sentiment, and (iv) Exploring regional political dynamics in Punjab and Haryana. The review ends by pointing out the gap that led to this study.

1. Conceptualizing Democracy and Satisfaction with Democracy

Classical and contemporary democratic theories distinguish many characteristics of democracy. Minimal or electoral conceptions emphasize competitive elections, universal suffrage, and essential political rights, often referred to as Schumpeterian or "procedural" democracy. Liberal ideas, on the other hand, include checks and balances, civil freedoms, freedom of the press, and independence of the courts (Dahl's "polyarchy") (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). The Varieties of Democracy (V Dem) project uses these differences to rate nations on numerous indexes, such as electoral democracy, liberal democracy, and deliberative democracy (V Dem Institute, 2023). In this broader framework, scholars often differentiate between the acceptance of democratic principles and satisfaction with the operational efficacy of democracy. Easton's (1975) theory of political support distinguishes between diffuse support (endorsement of the regime and its norms) and specific support (endorsement of current officeholders and programs). The World Values Survey and regional barometers ask people how happy they are with democracy to obtain a sense of how they feel about the political system as a whole, not simply how they feel about certain governments (Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 2011). "Contentment with democracy" is seen as a significant indicator of regime legitimacy and the perceived effectiveness of democratic institutions. Comparative studies demonstrate that satisfaction is affected by a blend of systemic and individual-level factors, encompassing institutional performance, corruption, economic outcomes, social trust, and the presence of one's preferred political party in power (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Anderson et al., 2005; Putnam, 1993). A decline in satisfaction is often perceived as an initial

sign of democratic crisis or regression (Norris, 2011). Within the context of your research, satisfaction with democracy is significantly linked to voters' perceptions of electoral integrity, institutional autonomy (such as that of the courts and Election Commission), and civil liberties—all of which are highlighted in your abstract and introduction.

2. Global Democratic Backsliding and Electoral Autocracy

An expanding corpus of research elucidates a global “third wave of autocratisation,” characterized by elected leaders progressively undermining democratic institutions from inside (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Backsliding today doesn't happen through military coups as often as it does through less obvious means. For example, it can happen by making the courts and government more political, limiting the media and civil society, harassing the opposition, and modifying the rules for elections. V Dem and Freedom House say that a lot of countries currently match the concept of “electoral autocracies.” These are administrations where multi-party elections still place, but the basic rules for fair and open competition, media freedom, and civil rights are often disregarded (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; V Dem Institute, 2023; Freedom House, 2023). This is well-known in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela. In these nations, the governments maintained their electoral legitimacy while augmenting their authority, usurping the judiciary, and monopolizing the media. There are two main ways that this literature from throughout the world is about India. It offers V Dem the vocabulary they need to talk about India, including “electoral autocracy” and “autocratisation.” It shows that hybrid regimes have a lot of disputed elections and charges of fraud or “vote theft.” This happens when formal electoral competition happens with informal manipulation and a loss of public trust.

3. India's Democratic Path, Electoral Integrity, and Public Sentiment

India has long been considered as the world's largest democracy since it holds frequent elections with a lot of people voting. But over the last ten years, a lot of measures have showed that democracy has gotten a lot worse. V Dem declared that India is no longer a

liberal democracy but an electoral autocracy because to constraints on the media, civil rights, and judicial independence, as well as greater pressure on the opposition and civil society (V Dem Institute, 2023). Freedom House has also dropped India's ranking from “Free” to “Partly Free” because majoritarianism is on the rise, resistance is being constrained, and laws are being utilized selectively against opponents (Freedom House, 2023). Scholars of Indian politics perceive these trends as a shift towards “ethnic democracy” or majoritarian nationalism, in which Hindu majoritarian identity becomes central to governmental legitimacy and protections for minorities are weakened (Jaffrelot, 2021). Others emphasize the increasing centralization of executive power and the diminishing clarity of distinctions between parties and states (Khosla, 2020). Indian survey study shows that people's attitudes are complicated at the same time. People still believe in democracy, and many think it is superior than any other kind of governance. People are not as happy with how democracy works, though, especially those who are less privileged or who are “losers” in politics (those whose party is not in power). People's views on corruption, the economy, law and order, and welfare delivery have a big effect on how people vote (Lokniti–CSDS election research; Norris, 2011). This discourse is mostly about the Election Commission of India (ECI). People have said in the past that the ECI is a mostly independent and professional group that can handle big, complicated elections with a decent amount of honesty (Quraishi, 2014). Electronic voting machines (EVMs), voter-verified paper trails (VVPAT), and stricter spending monitoring are some of the new technologies that have been suggested as solutions to make the process more open and efficient. But more recent discussions have made others question if the ECI is still known for being fair. Critics believe that the way elections are scheduled, the Model Code of Conduct is not enforced fairly, and complaints against leaders of the ruling party are handled are all signs of institutional pressure. Allegations of “vote chori,” manipulating voter lists, and wasting state resources, like the ones you brought up in your introduction about Bihar, make people even more worried about how fair elections are and how happy people are with democracy. The World Values Survey and CSDS Lokniti's “State of Democracy in South Asia”

projects show that a lot of people in India are voting and getting involved in politics. However, more and more people are starting to question whether elections are really fair. People generally believe in the voting process, but they don't trust politicians or political parties in real life.

4. Regional Political Context: Punjab and Haryana

While assessments at the national level are plentiful, there is a relative scarcity of comprehensive studies on state-level variations in democratic satisfaction, particularly in comparisons across neighboring states such as Punjab and Haryana.

Punjab

Punjab has a distinctive political trajectory shaped by the legacy of militancy and counterinsurgency in the 1980s and early 1990s. A Strong regional and religious identities based on Sikhism and Punjabi sub-nationalism and ongoing problems in farming, high youth unemployment, and problems like drug addiction.

Researchers say that these things make people vote a lot but also make them very cynical about political leaders, especially when they think that parties are corrupt, unresponsive, or involved in social and economic problems (G. Singh, 2000; P. Singh, 2008). The Shiromani Akali Dal, Congress, and, more recently, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have all been involved in party competition that has to do with federal autonomy, farmer welfare, and law and order. All of these things affect how much people trust institutions.

Reports from Lokniti–CSDS post-poll surveys and state-level analyses in edited volumes on Indian state politics show that many voters in Punjab are unhappy with how the government is doing and worry about how fair state institutions are, even though they still want to vote (Palshikar, Suri, & Yadav, 2014). This is in line with what you said in the start about how some Punjabi voters don't trust the Election Commission or the fairness of elections.

Haryana

On the other hand, Haryana is frequently said to have reasonably stable party rivalry but very heated caste-based politics, notably between Jats and non-Jats.

The state has a lot of farmland, but it also has areas around the National Capital Region that are quickly becoming cities and factories. Land, reserve rules, and law and order have been important issues in state politics.

Studies of Haryana's politics suggest that high levels of electoral mobilization coexist with acceptance of competitive electoral rules as the primary route to power. Dynastic politics, patronage networks, and caste alignments are significant; however, many citizens continue to regard elections as an effective means to influence government (Palshikar et al., 2014).

Haryana has had fewer recent large-scale uprisings or long-term breakdowns of constitutional order than Punjab. As you say in your introduction, this could be one reason why people trust the core democratic process more.

In both states, however, larger national issues, like majoritarian polarization, media domination, and judicial pressures, mix with local complaints. State-level literature elucidates the influence of agrarian crises, unemployment, social movements, and identity politics on individuals' lived experiences of democracy; yet, there is a paucity of studies that explicitly quantify "satisfaction with democracy" as a unique variable.

5. Synthesis and Research Gap

Democracies around the world are under pressure from creeping autocratisation, which typically happens in the form of "electoral autocracy," where elections happen at the same time that civil rights are smaller and institutions get captured (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

"Satisfaction with democracy" is a commonly utilized metric for assessing citizens' perceptions of the regime's performance, as opposed to mere abstract endorsement of democracy (Easton, 1975; Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 2011).

In India, indices such as V Dem and Freedom House record democratic regression, whereas survey research indicates a juxtaposition of robust electoral participation and diminished satisfaction with

democratic functioning, particularly in the context of apprehensions regarding corruption, polarization, and institutional autonomy (V Dem Institute, 2023; Freedom House, 2023; Jaffrelot, 2021; Quraishi, 2014).

Punjab and Haryana have different political histories and socio-economic problems at the state level, which may affect how people in those states experience and judge democracy. Current research on these states predominantly examines party systems, caste dynamics, and agricultural politics, rather than directly addressing democratic satisfaction (G. Singh, 2000; P. Singh, 2008; Palshikar et al., 2014).

However, there is little systematic, comparative research that directly assesses contentment with democracy in particular Indian states, correlates this contentment with perceptions of electoral integrity, institutional autonomy, and civil liberties; and compares two adjacent states—namely Punjab and Haryana—with divergent political trajectories (one characterized by historical insurgency and present social unrest, the other by relative stability and confidence in electoral institutions).

This study aims to address this gap by analyzing how residents in Punjab and Haryana evaluate the current state of democracy in India, including allegations of electoral fraud, regional political cultures, and overarching trends of democratic regression.

III. CONCLUSION

India's democratic trajectory stands at a critical juncture where competing political narratives fundamentally shape public perceptions of electoral integrity and institutional legitimacy. The 2025 Bihar elections exemplify this tension, with the opposition's "vote chori" allegations colliding with the BJP and Election Commission's emphatic rebuttals, creating divergent realities that citizens must navigate. This research demonstrates that political narratives do not merely reflect democratic conditions—they actively construct them by framing institutional trust, electoral fairness, and citizen satisfaction with democracy.

IV. REGIONAL VARIATION IN DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

The comparative analysis of Punjab and Haryana reveals how local political histories mediate the reception of national-level narratives. Punjab's legacy of militancy and ongoing socio-economic crises foster higher skepticism toward electoral processes and institutional autonomy, whereas Haryana's relative political stability correlates with greater acceptance of democratic procedures despite caste-based mobilization. These regional differences underscore that democratic satisfaction cannot be understood through national metrics alone; subnational contexts filter, amplify, or attenuate the impact of competing political narratives.

V. THE DUAL REALITY OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY

India's democracy currently embodies a paradox that international frameworks like V-Dem's "electoral autocracy" classification struggle to fully capture. On one hand, the Election Commission's technological innovations—real-time turnout monitoring through ECINET, live streaming of polling stations, and Multi-Constituency Remote Voting—represent genuine advances in electoral administration that enhance transparency and accessibility. On the other hand, allegations of voter roll manipulation, unequal enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, and institutional pressure on courts and media suggest erosion of the liberal democratic safeguards that historically complemented India's electoral procedures.

VI. EVIDENCE, TRUST, AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

The Bihar controversy highlights a critical vulnerability in contemporary Indian democracy: the evidentiary gap in fraud allegations paradoxically weakens legitimate concerns while normalizing institutional skepticism. The opposition's inability to substantiate "vote chori" claims with concrete proof—despite raising valid questions about voter deletions targeting marginalized communities—allowed ruling party narratives to dismiss all electoral integrity concerns as mere sour grapes. This dynamic mirrors global patterns of democratic backsliding, where the absence of smoking-gun evidence enables

gradual institutional capture through technically defensible but cumulatively corrosive practices.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

For India to reverse its democratic regression and restore confidence in institutional autonomy, three imperatives emerge. First, electoral transparency must move beyond technological fixes to encompass structural accountability mechanisms, including independent audits of voter roll revisions and mandatory transparency in ECI decision-making processes. Second, political parties across the spectrum must prioritize evidence-based discourse over inflammatory rhetoric, recognizing that unsubstantiated fraud allegations and dismissive institutional responses alike erode the epistemic foundations necessary for democratic deliberation. Third, civil society, media, and academic researchers must develop robust methodologies for assessing subnational variations in democratic satisfaction, moving beyond national-level indices to capture the lived experiences of citizens in states with divergent political trajectories.

VIII. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study opens several avenues for further investigation. Longitudinal research tracking democratic satisfaction across multiple electoral cycles in Punjab and Haryana could isolate the causal impact of specific narratives from broader socio-economic trends. Experimental studies examining how citizens process conflicting information about electoral integrity would illuminate the cognitive mechanisms through which political narratives shape perceptions. Comparative analysis extending beyond Punjab and Haryana to include states with different religious demographics, economic profiles, and party systems would test the generalizability of regional variation patterns identified here.

Ultimately, India's democratic future depends not merely on the formal conduct of elections but on citizens' belief that those elections meaningfully translate popular will into governance. Political narratives constitute the medium through which this belief is either sustained or eroded. As India

navigates the twin challenges of majoritarian polarization and institutional pressure, recognizing the power of narratives to construct democratic reality becomes essential for scholars, practitioners, and citizens committed to preserving the world's largest democracy.

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