

Policy, Politics and Public Perception in India: Challenges to Democratic Governance

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Abstract: Democratic governance is sustained not merely through periodic elections but through the continuous interaction between public policy, political competition, institutional accountability, and citizens' perceptions of the state. In India, this relationship has acquired particular significance because democratic politics operates within a socially diverse and economically unequal society. This paper examines the relationship between policy, politics, and public perception through the analytical sequence of policy → political communication → public perception → institutional trust → democratic legitimacy. Drawing upon the works of **Rajni Kothari, Granville Austin, Partha Chatterjee, Niraja Gopal Jayal, Ashutosh Varshney, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Amartya Sen, and Christophe Jaffrelot**, among others, the paper argues that contemporary challenges to Indian democratic governance cannot be understood only through the lens of electoral competition. They also concern the manner in which policies are formulated, communicated, and interpreted by citizens. The **farmers' protests of 2020–21** and debates surrounding the **Citizenship Amendment Act** provide contrasting examples of how policy can generate competing political narratives and divergent perceptions of legitimacy. Recent **Lokniti-CSDS** evidence further demonstrates that Indian citizens remain deeply engaged with elections while simultaneously holding complex views about government performance, democratic rights, and political communication. The paper concludes that the durability of Indian democracy depends upon maintaining institutional accountability, informed public reasoning, meaningful participation, and the capacity of governments to translate electoral mandates into legitimate and responsive governance.

Keywords: Indian democracy, public policy, political communication, public perception, democratic governance, institutional trust, political participation.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian democracy presents an important paradox. India adopted universal adult franchise at independence despite widespread poverty, illiteracy, and enormous social diversity. **Granville Austin, in *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (1966)**, described the Constitution as simultaneously an instrument of national unity, social revolution and democratic government. **Rajni Kothari's *Politics in India* (1970/1973)**, meanwhile, demonstrated that Indian democracy could not be understood simply through formal institutions; it had to be examined through the interaction of political parties, social groups, caste, region and the structures of political mobilisation.

This insight remains important because democratic governance involves more than the holding of elections. It concerns how public decisions are produced, how political actors explain those decisions, how citizens interpret them and whether institutions retain sufficient legitimacy to command public confidence. **Lokniti's own conceptual work on an "Index of Democratic Governance"** makes a similar distinction between democratic processes and outcomes. It proposes examining whether laws and policies are democratically formulated, whether they reflect popular aspirations, and whether their stated objectives are realised in practice. It also emphasises responsiveness, citizen awareness and state capacity as components of democratic governance.

The central argument of this paper is therefore that policy, politics and public perception constitute an interconnected democratic process. A policy does not enter society as a neutral administrative decision. It creates material consequences, produces beneficiaries and perceived losers, is interpreted through political narratives, and is subsequently evaluated by citizens through their experiences and available information. The resulting perceptions can strengthen or weaken institutional trust.

This relationship has become more complicated with the expansion of mass and digital communication. Political parties and governments can now communicate directly with citizens, while citizens can respond through elections, social movements, protests, and digital platforms. Consequently, democratic governance increasingly depends not only upon policy effectiveness but also upon the credibility of political communication and the quality of the public sphere.

Democracy Beyond Elections: The Indian Scholarly Debate

The institutional foundations of Indian democracy have been extensively examined by scholars. **Austin's** interpretation of the Constitution emphasised the balance between political democracy and social transformation. **Kothari** subsequently shifted attention from constitutional structures towards the operation of the "Congress system", arguing that Indian politics could not be understood independently of social cleavages and political accommodation.

Atul Kohli, in Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability (1990), introduced the question of governability into the analysis of Indian democracy. For Kohli, democratic legitimacy is affected by the state's ability to govern effectively while accommodating competing social demands. This becomes particularly significant in a society where the expansion of political participation continually brings new groups into the political arena.

Partha Chatterjee offered a different perspective in The Politics of the Governed (2004). He distinguished between formal constitutional citizenship and the practical political negotiations through which marginalised populations interact with the state. His concept of "political society" draws attention to citizens who may not always participate through the idealised mechanisms of civil society but instead negotiate with governmental institutions over welfare, land, housing and livelihood.

Niraja Gopal Jayal's Citizenship and Its Discontents (2013) further demonstrates that citizenship in India involves more than formal legal status. It encompasses questions of recognition, rights, belonging, and access to the state. These arguments are useful for understanding why public perception cannot simply be treated as an opinion about a government. Citizens evaluate governments through their experiences of citizenship itself.

Amartya Sen provides another important dimension. In **The Idea of Justice (2009)**, Sen emphasises public reasoning, democratic discussion and the comparative evaluation of institutions. From this perspective, democracy cannot be reduced to aggregation of votes; it requires opportunities for citizens to scrutinise public decisions and contest claims about justice.

Thus, Indian democratic governance must be understood simultaneously as electoral, institutional, social and deliberative.

POLICY, POLITICS AND THE PRODUCTION OF POLITICAL MEANING

Public policy is often presented as a technical process involving legislation, administration and implementation. In practice, however, policy becomes politically meaningful because different groups experience its consequences differently.

Welfare programmes illustrate this clearly. Food security, employment programmes, housing, direct benefit transfers and public health policies are not simply administrative mechanisms.

They shape citizens' experiences of the state and consequently influence perceptions of governmental responsiveness. At the same time, development policies involving land acquisition, infrastructure, taxation, agriculture or environmental regulation can generate conflicts between different interests.

This creates what may be called a politics of policy interpretation. Governments generally present policies through particular narratives: development, reform, welfare, national interest, empowerment or administrative efficiency. Opposition parties and social movements may interpret the same policies through alternative concepts such as exclusion, inequality, centralisation or loss of livelihood.

The **farmers' protests of 2020–21** provide a particularly significant illustration. The three agricultural reform laws were presented by the Union government as measures intended to expand agricultural marketing opportunities and reform the existing system. Farmers' organisations, particularly in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, expressed fears concerning the future of regulated markets and the Minimum Support Price system. The dispute subsequently became a major national political mobilisation, and the three laws were repealed in November 2021.

Lokniti-CSDS data demonstrate that the dispute cannot simply be understood as a narrow regional mobilisation. Its 2024 pre-poll survey reported that 58% of respondents identified with the farmers' protests, while 63% considered farmers' demands genuine and 11% regarded them as a conspiracy. These figures do not establish a single national interpretation of the protests, but they demonstrate the importance of public perception in transforming a policy dispute into a wider political issue.

The episode therefore illustrates an important democratic mechanism: policy creates political consequences not only through its formal provisions but through how affected citizens understand its implications.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE CHANGING PUBLIC SPHERE

Political communication bridges policy and public perception. Traditionally, newspapers, radio, television, political meetings and party organisations performed this function. Digital media have dramatically altered the communication environment.

The **2024 Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey**, which covered **19,663** respondents across **23 states**, found that **17.5%** of respondents reported sending campaign messages of a candidate or party through WhatsApp or Facebook during the election campaign. The same survey found that **23.9%** attended election meetings or rallies and **14.8%** participated in door-to-door canvassing.

These figures suggest that digital communication has become an additional layer of political participation rather than necessarily replacing traditional mobilisation.

The digital public sphere, however, creates a fundamental democratic dilemma. On one hand, it lowers barriers to political participation and enables citizens to communicate without depending entirely on established media institutions. On the other hand, the rapid circulation of unverified information can complicate public reasoning. **UNESCO** distinguishes misinformation from disinformation partly through the presence or absence of an intention to cause harm. This distinction matters because inaccurate political information does not always originate from deliberate political manipulation.

Political communication can also contribute to personalisation. People may associate political achievements with individual leaders rather than with the institutions, bureaucracies, and constitutional processes through which policies are implemented. This does not necessarily invalidate electoral leadership; rather, it raises an analytical question concerning the balance between leadership-centred politics and institution-centred governance.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

Public perception is neither simply a reflection of government performance nor merely the product of political propaganda. It is produced through the interaction of material experience, social identity, political communication, media exposure, and expectations.

The 2024 Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey illustrates this complexity. Sixty percent of respondents described themselves as either fully or somewhat satisfied with the performance of **the BJP-led NDA government** at the Centre over the preceding five years, while **36.2%** described themselves as somewhat or fully dissatisfied. The same survey showed that citizens associated government performance with a range of issues rather than a single policy agenda.

For example, **22.4%** identified **the construction of the Ram Mandir** as the government achievement they liked most, while **6.4%** identified **poverty reduction** and **5.6%** identified **employment creation**.

These findings are significant because they show that citizens evaluate governments through multiple normative frameworks. Economic performance, welfare, cultural identity, development, and symbolic politics may coexist within the same electorate.

The 2024 Lokniti post-poll findings also indicate that citizens hold different understandings of democracy itself. According to the survey, **43%** associated the essence of democracy with free and fair elections through which governments can be changed, **35%** emphasised equal rights, and **15%** identified freedom to criticise those in power.

This finding can be read alongside Sen's emphasis on public reasoning. If democracy is understood primarily as electoral competition, then elections become the central measure of legitimacy. If it is understood more broadly as equal citizenship, public reasoning and accountability, then democratic legitimacy must also be assessed between elections.

The **Election Commission of India** recorded a **66.10%** voter turnout in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, with **64.64 crore votes polled**. Turnout was **67.40% in 2019**. The relatively high level of electoral participation demonstrates continuing citizen engagement, but participation itself does not settle questions concerning the quality of deliberation, institutional accountability or minority protection.

CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF PERCEPTION

The **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019**, provides a contrasting case in which policy became inseparable from questions of identity and constitutional citizenship.

The Act amended India's citizenship framework concerning specified persecuted communities from **Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan**. The Union government's stated justification centred on providing a pathway to citizenship

for specified religious minorities from these neighbouring countries. **Critics**, including rights organisations, argued that the use of religion as a criterion represented a departure from principles of religious equality.

Amnesty International, for example, described the 2024 operationalisation of the CAA as inconsistent with constitutional values of equality and religious non-discrimination. This is an attributed assessment rather than a neutral description of the Act's legal effect.

The scholarly debate is broader. **Jayal's work on citizenship demonstrates** that citizenship is deeply connected with questions of belonging and state recognition. **Rajeev Bhargava's writings on Indian secularism**, particularly **Secularism and Its Critics (1998)**, conceptualise Indian secularism not simply as strict separation between religion and state but as a distinctive institutional relationship intended to accommodate religious diversity.

The **CAA controversy** therefore demonstrates how a policy can acquire significance beyond its immediate administrative purpose. It can become a symbolic question about the meaning of citizenship itself. The resulting public perceptions differed considerably across social and political groups, and the policy became the subject of parliamentary debate, constitutional litigation, mass protest and international commentary.

This case demonstrates why democratic governance cannot be understood purely through policy outputs. Legitimacy also depends upon how citizens understand the principles underlying state action.

INSTITUTIONAL TRUST, POLARISATION AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Ashutosh Varshney provides an important counterweight to accounts that portray Indian democracy primarily through the language of decline. In his analysis of India's democratic longevity, Varshney argues that India's democratic persistence cannot be explained only by structural conditions. He emphasises the importance of founding values, elite choices and, later, the interests of political actors in maintaining democratic competition.

Varshney nevertheless distinguishes between electoral democracy and liberal democracy. He argues that India has historically maintained competitive elections while experiencing weaknesses concerning civil liberties, minority rights and institutional constraints. His argument is therefore useful because it prevents democracy from being reduced either to elections or to a single measure of political freedom.

Christophe Jaffrelot's work, particularly Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy (2021), approaches contemporary Indian politics from the perspective of Hindu nationalism and changing relations between majority and minority communities. His interpretation is more critical of recent transformations than Varshney's emphasis on democratic persistence. Such differences illustrate an important methodological principle: democratic change in India remains contested among scholars and should be examined through evidence rather than through a single predetermined narrative.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta has similarly emphasised the importance of constitutionalism, institutional restraint and the relationship between political authority and liberal principles. The broader concern is whether institutions can maintain autonomy and accountability while responding to strong electoral mandates.

Consequently, institutional trust should not be equated with agreement with a government. In a democracy, citizens can support a government while distrusting particular institutions, or criticise a government while maintaining confidence in constitutional institutions. Democratic legitimacy is therefore multidimensional.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Five interconnected challenges emerge from the preceding analysis.

First, the tension between electoral responsiveness and long-term policy-making. Governments must respond to immediate citizen demands while addressing structural problems such as unemployment, inequality, environmental degradation, and institutional capacity.

Second, the fragmentation of the public sphere. Digital platforms have increased participation but can simultaneously produce information overload, misinformation, and politically segmented audiences.

Third, the problem of polarisation. Political disagreement is intrinsic to democracy. The institutional challenge arises when political competition transforms social differences into durable antagonisms that reduce the space for compromise.

Fourth, the gap between formal citizenship and substantive participation. Chatterjee's analysis reminds us that marginalised groups frequently engage the state through practical negotiations over welfare and resources rather than exclusively through formal institutional channels.

Fifth, the question of institutional accountability. Democratic legitimacy requires institutions capable of constraining political power, while governments require sufficient capacity to implement policies. Excessive concentration of power can weaken accountability; Excessive institutional fragmentation can weaken effective governance.

These challenges should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that Indian democracy has ceased to function. The 2024 election—with more than 64 crore votes cast—demonstrates the continuing centrality of electoral participation. The more appropriate scholarly question is how India's democratic institutions can reconcile participation, representation, state capacity and accountability.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between policy, politics and public perception provides a useful framework for understanding contemporary democratic governance in India. Policies are not experienced as abstract administrative decisions. They affect livelihoods, rights, identities and expectations. Political parties and governments subsequently interpret these policies through competing narratives, while citizens evaluate them through their own social experiences and sources of information.

The scholarship of Kothari, Austin, Chatterjee, Jayal, Sen, Varshney, Mehta and Jaffrelot demonstrates that Indian democracy cannot be reduced to electoral competition alone. It is simultaneously a constitutional system, a social process, a field of political mobilisation and a continuing negotiation over citizenship and state power.

The empirical evidence reinforces this complexity. The 2024 Lokniti-CSDS survey shows substantial engagement with elections and political campaigns, but also considerable variation in how citizens understand government performance and the meaning of democracy. Similarly, the 2024 voter turnout of 66.10% demonstrates continued electoral participation, while leaving open broader questions concerning representation, accountability and deliberation.

The central challenge for democratic governance is therefore not the elimination of political disagreement. Democratic politics necessarily generates disagreement. The more fundamental issue is whether disagreement can be processed through institutions that are sufficiently representative, accountable and capable of responding to citizens.

For India, sustaining democratic governance consequently requires attention to both the quality of policy and the quality of the public sphere. Transparent policy-making, credible political communication, meaningful citizen participation, institutional checks and informed public reasoning are not separate democratic requirements. They constitute an interconnected system through which political authority acquires and renews legitimacy.

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