Saarvari Election Reforms

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Note: The reforms presented here are applicable to democracies all over the world, but this article is written tailored to the context of India.

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People are getting more and more disillusioned with democracy and the election process day by day - seeing casteism, communalism, religious fundamentalism, regionalism, vote-buying, enticements, demagoguery, election-rigging, etc. becoming the norm, and seeing unprincipled and unethical politicians and even downright criminals winning the elections and getting into power, and getting either rich or sold to the rich.

People think of such solutions as prescribing minimum educational and other qualifications for politicians and barring those with criminal backgrounds from contesting elections, putting a limit and increasing transparency on election expenditure, and so on, to ameliorate the situation. But people also know that none of these measures will be ever enacted, and even if they are, will never be implemented true to their spirit. In fact, they are sure that the clever and unscrupulous politicians will find ingenious ways to beat the system, rendering all such measures ineffective. And in desperation, they wish for a benevolent dictator to take over the system to get out of the current pathetic situation.

But desperation leads us nowhere. We must take a deeper dive into the problem. We will look into what can be called voting systems or election models, which greatly influence the behavior of political parties, individual politicians, election dynamics and ultimately the election outcomes. The election models, over a long period of time, even affect the perception and expectations of democracies. There are many election models, which go by such names as First Past The Post (FPTP), Proportional

Representation, Preferential Voting, Single Transferable Vote, Additional Member System, and so on. At the time of framing the constitution, the FPTP model was chosen for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections because of its simplicity, albeit with certain apprehension about its effects on public life and governance. Now, we have over seventy years of experience with this model. And we clearly see that it is promoting undesirable behavior among political parties, individual politicians, and even among voters. It is making us lose our faith in democracy.

It is time to think about a better model, which inherently promotes better behavior among political parties, politicians, and voters. We want a model which increases the chances of good leaders, who are competent, ethical, and principled, winning the elections and reduces the chances of bad leaders winning the election. We want a model that enables us to quickly and easily remove bad leaders from power. We want a model that makes it easy for new leaders with better ideas and skills to enter the fray and win the elections. We want a model that increases the chances of service-oriented leaders, rather than politically-oriented leaders win the election. We want a model that minimizes the 'wasted' votes and hence encourages higher voter participation. We want a model that gives confidence to the political parties that they can field good candidates and yet win the election. Once the proportion of good leaders in power goes up, everything will become better.

In this article, we define one such, new, election model. We call this model the Saarvari model, after the Indian name of the year in which the first version of this model is designed. Saarvari, in various Indian languages, is written as शार्वरी, শার্বরী, શાર્વરી, ਸ਼ਾਰ੍ਵਰੀ, ಶಾರ್ವರೀ, ശാര്വരീ, ଶାର୍ବରୀ, ஸார்வரீ and శార్వరీ.

This model can be realized with a series of four reforms, which we call Saarvari reforms. The four reforms are:

1. Multiple Members per Constituency
2. Multiple Votes per Voter
3. Anytime Voting
4. Integrated Constituencies

We will now present these reforms in detail. We will discuss how they address many of the issues with the current model and how they bring several benefits to the voters, to the political leaders, to the political parties. We will discuss how these reforms will change the course of our democracy and restore our faith in it. We will discuss how these reforms can be implemented one by one in a gradual manner

without causing any disturbance to the normal course of democratic function and governance.

Reform 1: Multiple Members per Constituency

The first thing we have to understand about the current election model is its zero-sum nature. One candidate's vote gain is another candidate's vote loss, and one candidate's power gain is another candidate's power loss. This makes the elections very contentious. Candidates cannot but fight tooth and nail to snatch every single vote from the opponents. Candidates cannot afford to spare any effort, be it ethical or unethical, to win the election. Once even one of the candidates resorts to making false promises, taking populistic stances, appealing to the base emotions of voters, the other candidates have no choice but to follow suit. Whoever can outdo the others at such practices wins the elections.

To address these issues, we propose declaring every candidate who gains a minimum set number of votes, say 50,000 for the assembly constituencies and 3,00,000 for the parliament constituencies, a winner. With this change, three to four candidates would win the election. And hence there would be multiple MLAs/MPs from each constituency. If we are concerned about there being too many MLAs/MPs, we can address it by raising the minimum required votes and combining two or three constituencies into one.

This seemingly simple reform solves several problems and brings several benefits as follows:

1.1. First of all, with this change, there is no need for bitter fights. There is no need to win over all the other candidates, in order to win the election. All that the candidates have to do is to focus on getting the minimum votes, which any reasonably good candidate would be able to manage without having to resort to all kinds of unethical and unscrupulous practices. This means good candidates will have a higher chance of winning the election in this new system than in the current system.

1.2. In the current system, the single candidate who wins the election is expected to address the wide range of issues faced by the constituents. It is very unrealistic to expect any single individual to have a grasp of every single issue, much less the ability to address them. In the new system, there will be multiple MLAs/MPs serving

each constituency, and hence the chance of at least one of them having a grasp of any given issue would be three to four times higher, which means more issues will get the required attention.

1.3. Many voters, in the current system, abstain from voting, as they feel that their vote will go 'waste', because they fear that their chosen candidate will not win. In the new system, the majority of the voters will have a three to four times higher chance of seeing their candidate win, because of the minimum-votes criterion. It will encourage every voter to vote and thus actively participate in the democratic process.

1.4. In the current system, candidates could win an election with just 30% of the voters voting for them, and the rest, either voting for the other candidates or abstaining from voting altogether. In other words, candidates not acceptable to 70% of the voters could win the election, and hold power over them. This is against the basic spirit of democracy. It should be the other way round and that is what the new system does. With the minimum-votes criterion, the majority of the voters will see a candidate acceptable to them in power, in the new system.

1.5. In the current system, it is very difficult for a candidate who is new or independent, or who is more service-oriented rather than politics-oriented, to win an election, because it is difficult for them to get more votes than everyone else. In the new system, it is three to four times easier for such candidates to win an election, because all they have to do is get the minimum number of votes.

1.6. In the current system, just a few votes can make all the difference, pushing a bad leader into power and leaving a good leader, who may be close behind, by the wayside. In the new system, because of the minimum votes criterion, the chances are that both would get elected. This means that the good leaders would also be in power, to counter the bad leaders.

1.7. Currently the population distribution among constituencies is not even. Some constituencies have 1.5 to 2 times that of the population of some other constituencies. As a result, one leader in one constituency needs to serve a large number of people, while another leader in another constituency serves only a small number of people. Neither of these situations is desirable. In the current system, this problem would not get corrected until a census is taken and the boundaries of the constituencies are redrawn, which happens very rarely. In the new system, there would be no such need to redraw the boundaries at all. Because of the minimum

votes criterion, constituencies with more population will send more leaders into power, and constituencies with less population will send fewer leaders into power. The size of the constituencies does not matter anymore.

1.8. In the current system, the major political parties field only one candidate in the elections, who they think can win over the candidates of all other parties. In the new system, they can field more than one candidate, as more than one candidate could win the election. The parties could even abandon the concept of 'party tickets' and let anyone announce one's candidacy on their own, and let the voters decide whom they favor. This, in a way, also solves the problem of 'lack of internal democracy' in political parties.

1.9. In the current system, voters who like the party but not the candidate fielded by the party are in a bind. They have to either vote for a candidate they do not like or vote for a candidate from another party or abstain from voting altogether. In the new system, since there will be multiple candidates from the same party, they are likely to find at least one candidate who is acceptable to them and vote for him/her. This is also good for the political parties, as it helps them retain all the loyal voters, by not forcing them to vote for the one chosen candidate.

Reform 2: Multiple Votes per Voter

No wise person will put all his money in one bank, or in one stock, or in one property. Similarly, no voter should put all his/her trust in one leader. No leader is infallible. But, the current election model, by giving only one vote per voter, forces the voters to put all their trust in one candidate. And worse, if their chosen candidate does not win, they are forced by the system to put their trust in a leader, whom they did not trust to begin with. This is simply wrong. To right this wrong, we propose giving multiple votes, say ten, to each voter. The voter, then, can distribute the ten votes to multiple candidates whom he/she considers to be good. As an example, one voter can give four votes to one candidate and four to another candidate, and the remaining two to a third candidate. Another voter can give all the ten votes to just one candidate. Yet another voter can give two each to five different candidates.

This reform brings the following benefits:

2.1. In the current system, the voters, having only one vote to cast, are forced to pick only one candidate, and reject all the others. What happens if the voter thinks

two or three candidates to be reasonable, each bringing their own value to the table? What if the voter does not want to reject all others? Voting for only one candidate feels almost like ‘taking sides’. With this change, voters will be able to distribute their votes to multiple candidates. This reduces polarization among the voters to a great degree.

2.2. Many a time, it also happens that a voter has loyalty to a particular political party, but personally favors a virtuous candidate of another political party. In the current system, the voter is forced to choose between the two. With this change, the voters can distribute some of the votes to the candidate of their favorite party, and some to their favorite candidate who may belong to another party. This allows the voters to make a statement that virtues are as important as party affiliations, and no one should win an election just because of one’s affiliation to a particular political party.

2.3. The current system is built on the premise that the winning candidate would be able to serve all the constituents in a fair manner. But human nature being what it is, it is difficult for a leader to treat the voters who voted for him/her and the voters who did not, in the same manner. It is difficult even for the voters to approach a leader to whom they did not vote for, for any need. In the new system, because of multiple votes, it is almost certain that at least one of their chosen candidates will win the election, and hence they would have at least one leader whom they can approach legitimately, for any need.

2.4. Earlier, we discussed how the minimum votes criterion makes it easy for new and independent candidates to win the election. This reform makes it even easier for them to win the election, because voters have multiple votes, and can afford to give a couple of their votes to the new and independent candidates. Voters can 'keep the old as well as try the new' with this reform. This will dramatically increase the chances of new blood flowing into the system, which is essential for the health of the democracy.

Reform 3: Anytime Voting

In the current system, winning candidates are guaranteed power for five years. It is next to impossible to hold them accountable during those five years, till the next election. This is simply not right. Any worker in any job in the world gets fired or punished immediately if he/she does not meet expectations or does something wrong. It should be the same for an elected leader also. Hence we propose that we

should let the voters withdraw their votes at any time to any leader whose competency or ethics become questionable, and give those votes to a different or a new candidate. In other words, we propose that we should let voters redistribute their votes at any time as they feel necessary and abolish the system of once-in-five-years elections.

Anytime vote redistribution can be facilitated by taking advantage of the advances in information technology. We propose setting up a centralized computer system to manage the list of voters, the list of candidates, and the distribution of votes, and the vote counts for each candidate. The votes of the individual voters should be kept confidential like bank accounts are, and the up-to-date vote count of every single registered candidate should be published every single day.

We propose setting up 'election offices' all over the country that are open round the year, like all the other government offices do, to facilitate the redistribution of votes by the voters anywhere and at any time. Or, alternatively, ‘vote redistribution’ services can be added to the existing e-seva centers or registrar offices or post offices, which are already spread all over the country and which are open all through the year.

In this new system, as there will be no elections, there will be no ‘nomination process’ either. Rather, anyone can register oneself as a candidate with the election commission at any time and can go ahead and seek votes from the electorate. The candidate would become an MLA/MP whenever his/her vote count exceeds the minimum required votes. Similarly, whenever one’s vote count falls below the minimum votes mark, one will cease to be an MLA/MP, and would automatically become a candidate again.

To prevent voters from impulsively redistributing their votes too frequently, we propose imposing a three-month delay between two successive redistributions of the voters. A voter has to wait for at least three months, before he/she can redistribute his/her votes again, since the last time he/she distributed his/her votes. This would also reduce the workload on the election offices and on the computer systems. In practice, we can expect voters to redistribute their votes only when any of their chosen candidates fails to live up to their expectations, or when a new and promising candidate appears on the scene, which also only happens once in a while.

Because of anytime vote redistribution, a candidate’s vote count may cross the minimum votes mark one day and fall below it the very next day. This fluctuation can

put one in power one day and remove one from the power the next day, which is not desirable. This can be addressed by imposing another three-month limit. A candidate will come to power only if his/her vote count stays above the minimum vote count for three months continuously. Similarly, a leader in power will lose his/her position only if his/her vote count stays below the minimum vote count for three months continuously.

This reform will bring several benefits, as follows:

3.1. In the current system, the atmosphere gets highly charged with allegations, counter-allegations, skirmishes, and so on, as the election day approaches. The judgment of the voters gets impaired because of this commotion. They could even vote against their own best interest, under such conditions. And they have to live with their decision for five years. With this reform, the voters can take as much time as they need before they redistribute their votes. If they make a mistake, or if they come to know some new information, good or bad, about a candidate, they can change their decision and redistribute their votes after three months. This model improves the quality of voters' judgment multiple times.

3.2. The elections, in the current system, are like a gamble for every candidate. Even those currently in power can never be sure about winning the next election. This propels them to 'make hay while the sun shines'. Those who are not in power sling mud on those who are, to discredit them. In the new system, good leaders who consistently can keep the trust of the voters, who strive to adjust their behavior and improve their performance according to the voter's expectations, will be able to stay in power continuously for ten, twenty, or thirty years, without having to go through a very expensive and uncertain process of reelection every five years.

3.3. In the current system, the 'election season' causes disruption to public life in big and small ways for almost six months to a year. With the new system, there will be no elections and hence no such disruption to public life. Also, in the current system, the 'election season' places a heavy workload on the election machinery once every few years but leaves it idle for long periods in between. It is common to see resources being drawn from other branches of government during the election season, disrupting their normal function. In the new system, with the vote redistribution happening all year round, the workload on these offices gets distributed evenly throughout the year, like it is in any other Government department. There will be no need to draw additional resources from any other department.

3.4. In the current system, anyone who turns eighteen is eligible to vote. But if someone turns eighteen right after the day of the election, he/she has to wait till the next election, i.e., till the age of twenty-three, to exercise his/her right to vote. In the new system, there will be no such delay for eligible voters. As soon as one turns eighteen, one can register oneself as a voter at an election office, and distribute one's votes to the candidates of one's choice on the same day.

3.5. In the current system, people who are away from home have to disrupt their work or business or a pleasure trip or pilgrimage, to come back to their home polling station on the election day to cast their vote. In the new system, there are no polling stations or election dates. Voters can redistribute their votes at their leisure and can do so from any place at any time, as all the election offices are open all year round and connected to the same central computer system. It is similar to people not having to go to a particular branch of the bank for banking services.

3.6. In the current system, we do not have a good solution for Indian citizens who happen to be abroad for various reasons at the time of elections, to vote. This reform solves that problem also. The vote redistribution services can be added to all consulates abroad, along with all other consular services, who can connect to the same central computer system.

3.7. If an MLA/MP switches his/her affiliation from one political party to the other, should he/she lose his/her position? There has been much debate, constitutional provisions and amendments, and supreme court rulings on this question, but without a satisfactory resolution. The new system answers this question elegantly, by letting the voters decide whether the switch is done for the right reasons or wrong reasons. If the voters feel that the switch is done for the wrong reasons, they can simply withdraw their votes to the particular leader.

3.8. In the current system, many government programs and initiatives come to an abrupt end or meet with uncertainty every five years. Investments made till then could go waste. This is a loss of national resources and impedes national progress. With the continuous elections, there would be no such abrupt end to any program. Every program will take its natural course, either to evolve into something better and bigger or to peter out.

3.9. In the current system, the elections have to be postponed, if a natural disaster such as an earthquake, tsunami, floods, or pandemic, hits at that time. All the preparations and the expense involved in conducting the elections go waste. There

would be no such problems in the new system Also, in the current system, if the elections are postponed because of natural disaster, the incumbent leadership would have to stay in power for more weeks or months, beyond their elected term. In the new system, there is no concept of the 'elected term' and hence leadership staying in power for more weeks or months becomes a moot point.

3.10. In the current system, voters have to resort to media posts, on-line petitions, street demonstrations and protests to express their displeasure or disapproval of the actions of leaders and to call for their resignation. This leads to violence and disruption of life, both for the protestors and for the general public. In the end, the protesters run out of energy and the protests die down. Plus, organizing such protests and demonstrations is not easy and hence actually most of the misdeeds of the leaders and the governments go unchallenged. In the new system, there is no need for any of such wasteful petitions, demonstrations, protests, or violence. Voters can simply and immediately remove the leaders who are paying a deaf ear to them from power, by redistributing their votes to other leaders or to new leaders.

3.11. In the current system, there is no good mechanism for the leaders to gain feedback on their performance from the voters. Opinion polls, approval ratings, etc., are neither regular nor reliable. Whereas in the new system, the changes in the vote count serve as instant feedback to the leaders about their performance. Even if the vote count falls below the minimum required votes, a leader would have three months' time to regain the trust of the voters and get his/her vote-count above the minimum required votes.

3.12. In the current system, there is no good mechanism to recall leaders who are falling below expectation either from the performance or from the ethics perspective. Whereas in the new system, the recall process is built-in. Any voter can withdraw his/her votes to the candidate at any time. If the vote count of an MLA/MP falls below the minimum required, he/she will lose the position automatically.

3.13. With this reform, with no elections as we know now, there would be no need for that ink-mark to be put on the finger of the voter, and there is no need to worry about one voter casting multiple votes. Voters can be uniquely identified by the election offices with a unique Voter Identification Card or with the Aadhar card.

Reform 4: Integrated Constituencies

In the current system, voters can vote only for the candidates contesting from their own constituency. There is a problem with this limitation. Suppose there is a leader who is passionate about addressing the issues of a specific population segment, such as disabled people, who are spread over all the constituencies. In the current system, or even with the first three reforms, he/she would not win an election, no matter which constituency he/she contests from, because the votes of one such population segment would be very small. The same problem will be faced by candidates passionate about addressing issues specific to any other population segment such as teachers, doctors, weavers, traders, software engineers, farmers, transportation workers, and so on. Leaders passionate about issues of certain population segments are thus left by the wayside in the current system.

In order to solve this problem, we propose enabling the voters to distribute their votes to any candidate from any constituency. Then, all the disabled voters from all constituencies, for example, can distribute some of their votes to candidates who are passionate about solving their problems, and thus help them gain the minimum votes and get into power. Today, there is hardly any leader in power who is conversant with all the issues of the farmers. There is no leader who takes a long-term perspective about the issues farmers face. They only try to exploit the needs and stoke the emotions of the farmers to win the elections. This is very sad and is not what should be expected in a democracy. This reform helps experts in every field, rather than just the career politicians, to come into power.

In fact, with this reform, we can even get rid of the concept of constituencies altogether. We can let the candidates enroll with the election commission without a reference to any specific constituency. We can let the voters distribute their votes to any candidate from anywhere. This solves an important issue we face in the current system. Consider the situation, where there is a bill that is good for the state/nation as a whole but requires a certain sacrifice from the constituency. What is an MLA/MP supposed to do in that situation, in the current system? The Constitution assumes that the MLA/MP would focus on the interests of the state/nation as a whole. But the voters assume that the MLA/MP would focus on the interests of the constituency. These two contradictory assumptions put any conscientious MLA/MP in a bind. In the current system, most MLAs and MPs align with the voters' assumptions, which results in regionalism, which is not desirable. By removing the concept of constituencies, we make this a moot point. Every leader, by virtue of gaining votes from across the state/nation, will be viewed as a state/national level leader and would be expected to focus on state/national level issues. The local issues should be and will be, anyway,

addressed by local bodies like the Zilla Parishads, municipal corporations, and the panchayat boards.

In the current system, small, poor, and powerless communities hardly have any representation. To address this, in the current system, we reserve certain constituencies for SC, ST, women candidates. This is not a good solution because, neither can the leader represent legitimately the majority communities of the specific constituency, nor can he/she represent the minority community of the entire state/nation. With this reform, minorities everywhere can elect leaders of their choice and the leaders can represent the minority community from all over the state/nation.

This reform also helps voters who have an organic connection with more than one state or region, for family, business, property, job, etc. reasons. They can distribute some of their votes to the candidates hailing from their native place and some to the candidates hailing from their place of work or business or marriage.

In the current system, a candidate is allowed to contest from two constituencies, and if he/she wins both, he/she has to resign from one of the constituencies and a bye-election needs to be conducted. With this reform, there will be no constituencies, and hence someone contesting from two constituencies becomes a moot point. Voters from two or more regions of the state/nation can vote for the same candidate if they so wish.

Implementation

It is not necessary for these reforms to be implemented all at once. They can be implemented one by one, in the sequence described above, if preferred. Each reform makes democracy that much better by itself and lays the foundation for the subsequent reforms.

The first reform of ‘multiple winners per constituency’ is very easy to implement with a stroke of a pen, without changing anything else in the current election model, and without requiring a centralized computer system. The first reform itself brings almost half of the intended benefits of these reforms. The second, third, and fourth reforms, however, are better implemented together, after establishing a centralized computer system.

The reforms can be first tried in one or two states and then can be rolled out

throughout the country at the state level and at the national level if desired.

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These reforms, which we presented here at length, are not as complicated as they may sound. Just as a driver need not know all the parts and engineering of a car in order to drive it, neither the voters nor the candidates need to know all the details of these reforms, to adapt to the new system. All that the voters have to know is that they can go to any election office at any time and distribute their votes to all the candidates they consider worthy. All that the candidates have to know is that they can register with the election commission at any time, and get the minimum number of votes to get into power, and keep them to stay in power. The described benefits will automatically follow, by virtue of the process.

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India should implement these reforms and derive the described benefits of the Saarvari model as soon as possible. There should come a time when other democracies also adopt the Saarvari model, following the success of them in India.

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A common man without any political affiliation or ideological leanings.