**Informed choices**

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In the 19th century, the modern form of political parties along with parliamentary and electoral systems originated in Europe and the US.

Regardless of the political orientation of parties across the world – liberal or conservative – what is common among all of them is their passion to win political power. This power is exercised by either forming the government or functioning as opposition, where the latter plays a key role in influencing the policies of the former.

In parliamentary regimes, parties depend on mass support, which is achieved through democratic periodic elections, to gain political power. Parties take part in elections to get their nominees elected as members of parliament where political power is exercised. The parties try to get the support of voters by presenting party manifestos that help voters make the right choice.

After achieving an electoral victory, the party with an outright majority forms the government to implement its manifesto whereas minority parties function as an overseer of government policies. Each member of parliament performs three functions: voice people’s issues while participating actively in policy debates, oversee the legislative and non-legislative policies of the government, and make citizen-sensitive legislation.

Periodic democratic elections provide voters an opportunity for political accountability of political parties and their candidates. They enable voters to hold the officeholders accountable for their performance as public representatives. They ensure democratic continuity where, though in some cases the electors might not have choices, the possibility of succession in leadership is prevented.

Elections bring political stability and reinforce the political legitimacy of those who wield the power to run the state apparatus. Similarly, parties and individual candidates are exposed to people along with their policy programmes for popular scrutiny necessary for competitive governance. Finally, the political education of people makes policymakers responsive to the public will. Precisely, for these reasons, elections are viewed as an exercise that allows people to enforce their demands and take control of their country’s destiny.

The fundamental contribution of periodic elections is to improve governance where the citizens hold their representatives accountable by not voting for them if they fail to perform their role effectively. But the same citizens reward them with reelection if their performance meets their expectations. Elections are a democratic exercise where voters are provided with an opportunity to make political choices of electing their representatives.

A look at voters’ choices in established democracies suggests that voters hold policymakers accountable for their past decisions and policy performance. The electoral results of established democracies have revealed that the voters showed dissatisfaction with traditional ways of political representation. For instance, the two mainstream political orientations – conservatism and democratic socialism – have been replaced by new political entrepreneurs in the last decade in established political societies.

Data on polls suggests that those parties which introduce sound economic programmes have been successful, regardless of where they stand on the left-right spectrum. This is to say that parties’ economic development programmes influence voters’ choices. It seems so because democratic governance and responsive representation are equalized with the economic strength of a society by the citizens of established political cultures.

The last four decades of the electoral history of Pakistan suggest that voters have made choices between two parties the left-of-centre PPP and the right-of-centre PML-N. A reason for this voting behaviour could be the absence of effective alternative parties, candidates or policies. In the 2013 elections, the traditional patterns of the political representation of these two mainstream parties, which have alternated governments for the last four decades, were challenged by a new political entrepreneur, the PTI, a populist party. Voters, dissatisfied with the PPP and the PML-N made the PTI successful at the polls as a counterbalancing third political force.

These voters supported the PTI in the hope of having alternative economic policies and democratic governance. However, to their greater dissatisfaction, their goal of having alternative socio-economic policies and democratic governance was not realized, and the PTI preferred sticking with the status quo.

Voters’ political behaviour is more influenced by personality-centred politics, a religious-sectarian orientation, ethno-regionalism, provincialism, ‘biradri’ system, localism, and socio-economic background of candidates than by a party’s economic programme or the past performance of its candidates. Such political choices of voters have brought nothing new to the democratic governance of the country but proved to be a periodic traditional electoral exercise at the expense of public money.

The general elections in Pakistan are scheduled to be held on February 8, 2024, and they are going to provide an opportunity for voters to exercise their powers to choose their leader. Election Day allows people to hold parties and candidates accountable for their past policy performances and promises. It is also a day to vote on the basis of parties’ future economic programmes instead of going with the traditional way of making choices based on sectarian, ethnic and political affiliations.

Since elections are the final process of recruitment to political offices, voters need to make intelligent choices. For that, voters need to know the political ideology of each political party combined with its five-year programme to be issued for the socio-economic development of the country. It is also necessary to identify the political orientation of candidates and their political will to implement their party’s manifesto.

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