

How Voting Systems Affect Political Entry and Exit? Evidence from Village Elections in India

Priyadarshi Amar*

September 15, 2024

Abstract

In recent years, many countries, particularly in the Global South, have undergone decentralization, transferring power to local bodies. This study focuses on exploring the consequences of a crucial aspect of decentralized government: the voting systems used to elect executives. While existing scholarship has extensively examined the incentives and performance of the head of government under different voting systems, little attention has been given to non-executive politicians. I argue that if shifts in the voting system affect the de-facto power of a seat, they also influence who enters and who stays in the race. In particular, I examine how these shifts affect candidate nomination (who enters), withdrawal (who exits), and candidacy (who stays) for non-executive political offices, with a focus on consequences for historically marginalized groups. This research seeks to contribute to our understanding of how changes in the value of a seat shapes political dynamics.

Keywords: Voting Systems, Elections, Political Behavior, Local Politics, Rural Politics, South Asia

In recent years, there has been a global trend toward decentralizing power to local bodies, particularly in the Global South. These local bodies typically comprise an executive and a council of members, with council members usually directly elected by voters. However, the voting systems for selecting the head can vary, with the two most common systems being direct election by voters and indirect election by council members. The existing scholarly literature has extensively debated how these different voting systems create distinct incentives and, as a result, have varying consequences (Rogers, 1926; Riker, 1955; Bernhard and Sala, 2006; Lijphart, 1992; Przeworski et al., 1996; Cheibub, 2007; Horowitz, 1990; Linz, 1990). However, much of the

*PhD Candidate, University of Wisconsin–Madison

literature has primarily focused on the incentives and role of the head, thereby overlooking the incentives and behavior of council members.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the consequences of different voting systems for heads on council members in Maharashtra, a state in western India with a population of over 114 million. Maharashtra is an ideal case study due to two key factors. First, the roles and responsibilities of council members have remained unchanged despite shifts in voting systems, offering a unique opportunity to explore the de-facto consequences of these systems. Second, elections in Maharashtra follow a predetermined pattern, occurring every five years. Moreover, recent years have witnessed several shifts in the voting system. Prior to 2017 and in 2021, heads were indirectly elected, while between 2017 and 2020, and from 2022 onward, heads were directly elected. The timing of elections and shifts in the voting system create a potentially exogenous variation in exposure to the voting system, allowing for a systematic study of its consequences. I examine whether shifts in the voting system affect political entry (candidate nominations), exit (withdrawals), and who stays in the race (final candidates).

Why would a direct election system impact council members and voters? In Maharashtra, the executive serves as the authorized signatory and possesses decision-making powers in village councils. However, council members have the power to bring a no-confidence motion to remove the head ([Heinze, 2024](#)). Typically, voters select their representatives from smaller constituencies known as wards. These elected representatives then choose the head of the council through majority voting. Consequently, the head has a stronger incentive to cater to the preferences of council members since they are elected by the council members themselves.

A shift to a direct election system means that voters directly elect the head. As a result, the head would be more inclined to represent the preferences of the median voter in the larger constituency due to re-election motives. Therefore, a shift from an indirect to a direct election system may result in the head being less accountable to council members and more accountable to voters. Furthermore, if the head becomes more powerful and less accountable to council members, it can hinder their ability to negotiate for rents and exert influence. This, in turn, can impact their prospects as politicians and their overall career trajectory in politics. To that end, I expect that a direct election system will reduce the value of a council member seat.

Let's first focus on political decision to file nomination for office, decrease in value of seats

implies that perceived benefit of running for office is lower, hence, some individuals who aspire to run may decide not to contest. Once all nominations have been submitted, some candidate may join forces and form coalition, leading to withdrawal. Also, some nominated candidates may be forced to exit by elites. Both entry and exit decision might affect who stays in the race. If the entry and exit affects potential political aspirants from specific groups, then it may shape the social composition of candidate pool.

A key empirical challenge in studying the causal impact of the voting system is the potential fundamental differences between villages under the direct and indirect systems. However, this issue is less concerning for my analysis because the treatment assignment leverages quasi-random variation in the timing of village elections and shifts in the voting system. To further address potential biases, I plan to conduct the analysis with a restricted sample, specifically focusing on villages that had elections conducted just prior to and after the shift, allowing for a comparison of villages with similar election timing.

To examine uncover the underlying mechanisms, I plan to rely on primary data form two sources. First, I will conduct 50 semi-structured interviews with local bureaucrats, politicians, and party workers. These interviews aim to understand whether the patterns observed in the secondary data analysis align with the experiences and observations from the field. Additionally, the insights gained from these discussions will be used to inform the instrument of the survey. In the second stage, I will gather primary data on 1000 council members through phone surveys across voting systems. The surveys will measure their motives for running, internal and external influences on decisions like filling nomination and withdrawal, and de-facto roles and responsibilities.

This study makes two significant contributions. First, it sheds light on the potential political spillovers for non-executive politicians under different voting systems for the executive. By examining the political behaviour of council members, it helps us understand how these voting systems impact political dynamics especially in undeserved rural areas and hence, deepens our understanding of the merits and demerits of direct elections in such contexts (Persson and Tabellini, 2003; Micozzi, 2013; Gaebler and Roesel, 2019). Given the objective of decentralization to strengthen grassroots democracy, this research provides valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the political implications of a crucial aspect decentralized governance: the voting

systems to elect executives.

Second, while there is a robust body of scholarship within political science that examines the factors affecting the decision to run for office, much of this work has focused on state and national politicians (Dal Bó, Finan and Rossi, 2013). In the context of decentralized institutions, studies have predominantly explored experimental interventions that reduce barriers (Gulzar and Khan, 2018), rather than focusing on how institutions shape the costs and benefits of running for office. By examining the role of political power under different voting systems, this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between the stakes of a political office and the supply of politicians.

References

- Bernhard, William and Brian R Sala. 2006. "The remaking of an American Senate: The 17th amendment and ideological responsiveness." *The Journal of Politics* 68(2):345–357.
- Cheibub, José Antonio. 2007. *Presidentialism, parliamentarism, and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dal Bó, Ernesto, Frederico Finan and Martín A Rossi. 2013. "Strengthening state capabilities: The role of financial incentives in the call to public service." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128(3):1169–1218.
- Gaebler, Stefanie and Felix Roesel. 2019. "Do direct elections matter? Quasi-experimental evidence from Germany." *International Tax and Public Finance* 26:1416–1445.
- Gulzar, Saad and Muhammad Yasir Khan. 2018. "Motivating Political Candidacy and Performance: Experimental Evidence from Pakistan.".
- Heinze, Alysaa. 2024. "Empowering the local executive: When electoral reform disrupts elite coalitions." *Working Paper* .
- Horowitz, Donald L. 1990. "Comparing democratic systems." *J. Democracy* 1:73.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1992. "Democratization and constitutional choices in Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary and Poland 1989-91." *Journal of theoretical politics* 4(2):207–223.

- Linz, Juan J. 1990. "Presidents vs. parliaments: The virtues of parliamentarism." *Journal of Democracy* 1(4):84–91.
- Micozzi, Juan Pablo. 2013. "Does electoral accountability make a difference? Direct elections, career ambition, and legislative performance in the Argentine Senate." *The Journal of Politics* 75(1):137–149.
- Persson, Torsten and Guido Tabellini. 2003. "The economic effects of constitutions: what do the data say.".
- Przeworski, Adam, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi. 1996. "What makes democracies endure?" *J. Democracy* 7:39.
- Riker, William H. 1955. "The senate and American federalism." *American Political Science Review* 49(2):452–469.
- Rogers, Lindsay. 1926. *The American Senate*. AA Knopf.