



Research Foundation for Governance: in India

Summary of the public debate

COMPULSORY VOTING: BLESSING OR CURSE?

12th January, 2010

5:00 pm to 6.30 pm

Zen Cafe

On Tuesday, January 12th 2010, the Research Foundation for Governance in India (RFGI) held an open house debate discussing the topic “*Compulsory Voting: Blessing or Curse?*” at the Zen Cafe, Ahmedabad. This debate, attended by people from different backgrounds and ideologies, was the first-ever public debate on the new Compulsory Voting law in Gujarat.

Founder of RFGI, Kanan Dhru opened the debate by outlining the basic details of the Gujarat Local Authorities (Amendment) Bill, 2009. Highlighting the necessity of debate around such important legislations, she then invited attendees at the event to raise their opinions on the topic. The opinions were very diverse and largely divided, with several valid arguments raised both for and against compulsory voting.

Majority of the participants seemed to agree that voter engagement in local and state elections is a problem for Gujarat and India generally. It results in politicians being less accountable to the public (as gaining votes becomes less important), and governments having smaller mandates. Though all seemed to agree that there were clear problems with the public attitude towards voting, question remained whether these could be solved through compulsory voting.

Those in favour of the Bill suggested that citizens remain largely disinterested in local politics and blamed central/state government for all their problems and thus, compulsory voting will enable people to be more aware about their local bodies. They opined that compulsory voting could help in some way as it will force people to take the time to think about the political process and educate themselves about their choices.



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However, those against the Bill said they found it difficult to ascertain whether or not compulsory voting will result in better politics or more efficient Government. Their concern was that informed voters cannot be created through force/undemocratic means. People will learn and participate in the process effectively only when they actually want to. Methods to remedy this apart from compulsory voting include education and awareness campaigns, or simply better primary education for more people that stressed the duty of citizens to vote.

While the participants welcomed the 'none of the above' option being given to the voters under the Act, many felt that government should also specify what would be the consequences if 'none of the above' secured more votes than any of the contesting candidates. While considering how to enforce the law, some participants suggested that rather than punishing non-voters, the Government could reward those who vote. It was not clear how this would best be done, though the two obvious suggestions raised were minor tax breaks or financial incentives. This way, it would not appear so coercive to the population and might actually be more effective at getting people out to vote.

In conclusion, some of the major points raised at the debate, which will be sent to the State Government are the following:

- 1) The Government must seriously pursue a larger political reforms agenda with comprehensive re-structuring of relevant facets such as inner-party democracy in political parties, decriminalisation of politics and more accountability from the elected representatives at all levels.
- 2) The Government must give adequate emphasis to education and awareness campaigns, or simply to creating better primary education for more people that stressed civic duties.
- 3) The Bill needs clear guidelines about the 'none of the above' option as it still remains under question as to what would be the consequences if 'none of the above' option secured more votes than any of the contesting candidates.
- 4) There must be debates/discussions, both in public as well as in the Legislative Assembly, on important legislations.
- 5) Technical issues such as problems with the electoral rolls still remain to be solved before compulsory voting can be implemented successfully.