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ON THE PLACE OF ELECTORAL STUDIES IN POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT : Electoral geography has been one of the most widely cultivated themes through the sixities and seventies. It is through these studies that attempts were made by some scholars to infuse quantification and behaviouralism in political geography in an attempt to pull out the sub-field from academic backwaters to the mainstream of social science research. These studies, however, have lacked a definite focus or direction, since, as Cox noted, the place of election studies in political geography as a whole has not been adequately explained. This article makes an attempt in that direction by placing electoral studies in the context of the contemporary view of human geography as a study of " who gets what where ", and the related view of political geography as the study of spatial aspects of power politics and conflict resolution. Since in all democratic societres electoral contest is the first step in the game of political power and control of government, geography of elections may be viewed as a first step in the the study of the state as a conflict resolving mechanism.

The professional interest of geography in the study of elections is now more than six decades old. The first published researches on the subject included those by Siegfried (1913) and Krebheil (1916). These were followed by some other sporadic contributions (e. g., Wright, 1932) and by the justly famous **Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States** (Paullin, 1932) in which were included a number of maps of voting results. Substantial geographical researches on elections were, however, made only in France under the leadership of Andre Siegfried who has rightly been called the father of " electoral geography". Siegfried's book (1949) on the geography of elections of Ardeche region of France is a classic of its type. Among the works of his numerous students and associates perhaps the best known are Francois Goguel (1951) and Lancelot (1968). All these studies were in the old man-land relationships tradtion. With the rumblings of the quantitative-explanatory revolution in the social sciences this traditional approach soon lost following though it was not immediately replaced by an alternative approach to the study of elections, mainly owing to the late arrival of the quantitative revolution in political geography (Dikshit, 1977). Only in the early sixities did electoral studies became an important theme in political geography and by the middle of 1970s many had begun to think that they comprised " the most actively developing aspect of political geography " and that electoral geography was now " one of the main sources of fresh insights into the general field of human geography " (Busteed, 1975). The popularity of elections as a theme for political geographical study is evidenced by the publication of a popular monograph in 1975 (Busteed) which has since been followed by a detailed paperback on the

geography of elections (Taylor and Johnston, 1979).

One of the chief reasons for this increased interest has been that, in a sense, "more than any other aspect of political geography, the study of voting behavior has begun clearly to reflect the conceptual and methodological emphasis of the new mainstream of contemporary geographic research" (Soja, 1974), which has been increasingly concerned with the use of sophisticated tehniques of quantitative analysis, spatial diffusion processes, and behavioural studies. A leading practitioner had gone so far as to declare: "If political geography is to be integrated into geography as a science with an emphasis upon rigor in drawing hypotheses, hypothesis testing, and theory construction, then it is likely that studies of areal variations in the level of different political activities will play an important role in this integration. Data collected by bounded areal units referring to such areal phenomena as voting for different parties or issues are among the most available and accessible sources of quantitative data for the political geographer to apply to political geography canons of scientific method used in other branches of the field" (Cox, 1968).

But "A major underlying weakness of voting geography has been the failure to relate it to studies in political geography as a whole" (Cox, 1976). The focus and objective of geographical studies in elections and the place of these studies in the total context of political geography have not been adequately explained. Cox's above noted objection against Busteed (1975) is also true of Taylor and Johnston (1979), since although the two authors briefly explained how in terms of the contemporary definition of human geography as the study of spatial organization of society "one can identify the main geographical elements in a typical election", they neglected to bring out the nature of the relationship between geography of elections and political geography as a whole. This note is an attempt in this direction.

The capitalist pattern of economy (which would broadly include economic organization of most countries outside the "communist" fold) is essen tially based on economic shortages—real or contrived. Owing to these shortages the citizens experience a continuing conflict for the control of resources from which rewards (i.e., satisfaction) can be derived. And, because conflict is endemic in scarcity, poltical systems are essentially conflict resolving mechanisms (see Cox and Reynolds, (1974). So, central is this theme of scarcity and conflict to the understanding of the problems of contemporary society that much of the "new" geography of 1970-associated with what Smith (1977) called "the radical or relevance revolution"—focuses on these conflicts which are fought out in political arenas Hence the claim that much of contemporary human geography is political geography since all studies related to spatial organization of society must directly or indirectly be concerned with governments which are the chief determinants of "who gets what where" the central question in all contemporary welfare-oriented geographical research. In all democratic countries with multi-party political systems, the electoral battle is the first step in the process of coming to power. Looked from this perspective the geography of elections would form the first stage in the study of political geography of modern democracies.

As Miliband (1969) argued, the capitalist class has to a great extent succeeded in organizing the society and its control mechanism in its own best interests so that the political process of elections become of only minor importance—almost a facade—in the distibution of real power. Looked at from this perspective, the main purpose that elections serve is to ensure maintenance of the **status quo**, i. e., to perpetuate the entrenched capitalist hold over the affairs of the nation. Ambitious individuals aspiring for political office may join a particular

party because of their faith in the declared principles of that party—as in the case of hard core Conservatives and Labour sympathisers in U. K.-but good many people join the political party in which they are most likely to obtain power, and as the case of the Janata Party in India in 1979–1980 in the centre and the states (particularly in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh) would show, many would conveniently change parties if defection offers greater rewards.

Such an unprincipled change of political loyalties on the part of political leaders, and the fact that successive elections achieve little more than the maintenance of **status quo**, may often breed indifference to electoral politics among the common people. This is all the more so because candidates and parties differ so little from one another. Owing to the practice of universal suffrage each party in a multi-party system has, all the time, to remain alive to the fact that in order to stay in power, it must accommodate to the major initiatives of its rival party (or parties) so that it is able to succeed in attracting segments of non-committed voters sympathetic to the opposite side. As Anthony Downs (1957) has explained, owing to this factor political parties, like competing business houses, invariably converge in terms of their party proposals. For this reason, changes in government in most democratic countries are rarely followed by major policy shifts and politics in most multi-party democracies in the non-socialistic countries has, in practice, " become little more than a contest for who shall sit on the horse already headed down a narrow lane with few bends and even fewer forks to be negotiated " (Johnston, 1977).

Dispite all these complications, however, politics continues to be of fundamental importance in modern times. Since now in every political system government has come to control increasing proportions of income, social facilities, and employment opportunities.

In all modernized societies welfare of the individual is highly dependent upon the activities of governments. " Modern urban man is born in a publicly financed hospital, receives his education in a publicly supported school and university, spends a good part of his life travelling on publicly built transportation facilities, communicates through the post office or the quasi-public telephone system, drinks his public water, disposes of his garbage through the public removal system, reads his public library books, picnics in his public parks, is protected by his public police, fire and health systems : eventually he dies, again in a hospital, and may even be buried in a public cemetary", (Teitz, 1968). This is a far cry from the nature and role of government in the pre-modern phase of free enterprize and laissez-faire economy when governments had only a protective function, maintaining law and order within the frontiers against foreign invasion. Since governmental action impinges on nearly all aspects of man's life in every modern society, decisions taken by governments regarding what is to be done where are of far-reaching importance in the life of its citizens. As such, holding the horse's rein brings immense power. And since the rein can be got hold of and firmly retained only through successful performance at the hustings, elections continue to be of great importance. While in federal states the process operates at three levels–centre, state and local; in unitary states it is only a two level affair--central and local. While most policy decisions would, no doubt, be "aimed at meeting perceived needs as far as resources will allow and at providing sensible long-term policies, but some is not, it is pragmatic and aimed at short-term, often electoral goals, and this accounts for much of the spatial variation in spending which cannot be associated with needs and resources " (Johnston, 1979). Particular governments are, in fact, often found to "produce spatial variations in their spending

by favouring those parts of their territory (constituencies) which elected them, and by directing allocations towards the marginal areas where seats can be won and lost" (Johnston, 1979).

Viewed from the above perspective, geographical study of elections is primarily oriented toward the study and analysis of spatial aspects of how politicians at different levels of authority local, central, and state-obtain, manipulate, and maintain power. Electoral studies, therefore, stand as the key element in understanding the roles of governments as spatial allocators. The nature of government–the spatial bases of support to the ruling party–is chief determinant in the "where" part of the central question "who gets what and where?" to which modern geographers in increasing numbers are addressing themselves.

If one were to define political science as the study of the processes of political decision-making, then political geography could as well be partly defined "as the study of the spatial and environmental perceptions of such decision makers" (A. H. Taylor, 1973). It is with this aspect of political geography that geography of elections is essentially concerned. By introducing the valuable spatial component "where" to the political scientist's central question " who gets what " electoral studies in geography can contribute to a better understanding of the political processes involved in achieving power.

The traditional view about the place of electoral studies in geography was that "uniformity in number of votes cast in favour or in opposition to particular issues or candidate is indicative of spatial differences in voting. This lack of uniformity is of special interest to the geographer and should be as much an intergral part of political geography as are distributional aspects of other political phenomena" (Roberts and Rummage, 1965). But geographical study of elections is not limited to the depiction of areal distribution of votes. It is equally interested in other spatial aspects of political behaviour manifested through the outcome of elections. As Rowley (1969) wrote, a defining characteristic of recent developments within electoral geography as in geography as a whole, is not simply its impiricism but its concern for theory; and a process-oriented geographical prospective that is involved in the study of elections, is highly conducive to achieving this objective. Increased interest in the study of elections has also been a logical product of the general trend in modern geography where the behaviour of the individual was being increasingly adopted as the basic unit of analysis primarily as a reaction to the traditional concern with generalized geographical data that had tended to disregard the under-lying " behavioural " reality.

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