

ETHICAL SOCIETY: A PREMISE ON WHICH SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRACY RESTS

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Abstract: Samuel Phillips Huntington's thesis on the 'Third Wave' of democratization, as presented in his seminal work "The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century", posited democracy as the preeminent and widely accepted form of governance. While democracy may prevail quantitatively in contemporary times, it grapples with numerous challenges in terms of its qualitative aspects. This research article identifies the dearth of ethical values as a significant factor contributing to the erosion of democracies worldwide. Moreover, this erosion has the potential to incite a 'new wave against democracy'. Consequently, this article aims to explore the potential remedy for this issue by anchoring democracy in an ethically conscious society. We contend that an ethically grounded society serves as a fundamental prerequisite for nurturing a high-quality and prosperous democracy, ultimately acting as a formidable barrier against the imminent and looming threats to democratic systems.

Keywords: Ethical Society, Democracy, Challenges, Democratization, Media, Populism, State, Third Wave, Democracy, Shock and Awe effect.

1. Introduction

Following the establishment of the 'third wave' of democratization

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and the end of the Cold War, there was a prevailing belief that authoritarianism and other unpopular forms of governance would diminish, with democracy emerging as the preeminent and revered system. However, despite democracy's current status as the most widely adopted form of government, it confronts significant gaps and challenges. This is particularly evident in countries where democracy is still in its transitional phase and has not fully matured. Developing or under developed nations encounter the emergence of 'well-intentioned dictators' within the democratic framework. Transitional democracies are plagued by various unethical issues including corruption, bribery, violence, intolerance, secessionism, elitism, costly election campaigns, inequality, poverty, unemployment, constitutional breakdown, regionalism, populism, and so on. Even in European countries and the United States, considered the bastions of democracy, ethical concerns have cast a shadow over democratic processes. Highly disillusioned leaders, voter apathy, organizational disenchantment, heightened populism, declining voter turnout, polarization, inequality, and political-corporate nexus have all manifested within these democratic societies (Kriesi 02). These unethical components and practices contribute to a democratic deficit and a regression in democratic values.

Within this context, we contend that the establishment of an ethical democratic society is imperative for the realization of a flourishing political society. An ethical society provides the necessary foundation upon which the fundamental tenets and ideals of an ideal democracy can be upheld and advanced. Conversely, the absence of an ethical society hampers and compromises the integrity of democratic principles. In fact, this dearth of ethical values may even pave the way for the emergence of a formidable 'wave' that opposes democracy, potentially culminating in the complete eradication of democratic systems and practices.

By placing significant emphasis on the cultivation of an ethical society, we acknowledge the pivotal role it plays as a safeguard against democracy's erosion. An ethical society serves not only as a catalyst for fostering ethical behaviour within democratic frameworks but also as a counterforce against the rising tide of threats that jeopardize the democratic ideals. Consequently, sustaining an ethical society becomes an essential strategy to preserve and fortify the foundations of democracy, ensuring its continued existence and

relevance.

2.Ethics and Ethical Society: Conceptual Clarifications

In order to comprehensively examine the implications of ethics and an ethical society on democracy, it is imperative to engage in academic discussions and clarify certain foundational principles and types of ethics.

The concept and practice of ethics serve as an evaluative parameter for assessing and classifying various aspects of individual, cultural, societal, and religious contexts as correct, ideal, and socially accepted. Throughout history, scholars and philosophers have contributed to the theoretical frameworks and practical implications of ethics, reflecting the evolving nature of this field. Plato, for instance, posited a virtue-based understanding of ethics, considering human well-being as the ultimate objective of human thought and behaviour (Plato). This perspective implies that in order to achieve human well-being, individuals shall cultivate certain ethical norms and values.

In contrast, Aristotle emphasized the examination of virtues as a means to gain clarity about the ultimate goal of human life (Aristotle). Aristotle builds upon Plato's ideas by delving deeper into the nature of virtues and their connection to the ultimate purpose of human life. He argues that a thorough exploration of virtues provides clarity about the ultimate aim and guides individuals towards ethical conduct. Aristotle's approach emphasizes the practical application of ethics, highlighting the importance of virtuous behaviour in achieving a meaningful life. Turning to ancient Chinese philosophy, Confucian texts primarily discuss ethics in terms of virtues and the corresponding ideals of individuals (Wong). Confucius regarded ethics as a guiding principle for individuals to positively contribute to their social lives, emphasizing the importance of role-based ethics (Nuyen 315). The emphasis on virtues and corresponding ideals reflects a moral framework centred on personal and social responsibilities. This role-based ethics underscores the interplay between individual virtues and their impact on the greater social fabric.

Immanuel Kant's doctrine of the 'categorical imperative' presents a distinct ethical framework. According to Kant, ethical decisions and actions should derive from goodwill, self-determination, and rationality (Kant 54). By appealing to universal moral laws rather than personal desires, Kant establishes a

deontological perspective that emphasizes duty and ethical obligations. Engaging with Kant's argument deepens the understanding of ethical theories grounded upon rationality and a sense of moral duty. In contrast, Utilitarianism posited that the value and moral rightness of an action should be determined by its contribution to the welfare and happiness of the individuals affected by it, aiming for the greatest overall happiness. The utilitarian perspectives of Jeremy Bentham and J.S Mill introduce a consequentialist approach to ethics. Bentham's focus on the pursuit of pleasure and the maximization of happiness highlights the importance of calculating the overall welfare of those affected by an action (Bentham and Mill). On the other hand, Mill's emphasis on the quality of happiness introduces a nuanced consideration of the well-being and fulfilment of individuals (Mill 08). Utilitarianism's focus on the consequences of actions prompts a critical examination of the ethical implications of one's choices.

3. The Ethical Cases and Challenges Against Democracy

In contemporary society, whenever a widely popular phenomenon or process becomes subject to scrutiny due to ethical concerns inherent in its characteristics or external factors, it inevitably garners significant attention. This attention is proportional to the extent of its popularity and acceptance. Democracy, likewise, finds itself in a comparable situation. Celebrated as the most mature, accepted, and prevalent type of governmental system, democracy currently faces considerable philosophical and practical ethical challenges that necessitate thorough examination and contemplation. The failure to effectively address these ethical challenges carries severe consequences, primarily due to the absence of a readily available alternative that possesses the maturity, popularity, and acceptance associated with democracy. It will also open the gateway for the 'waves' against democracy.

In the realm of ethics and theory, democracy represents a form of governance wherein power rests with the people and their chosen representatives, who are elected through a democratic process. This system operates based on numerical strength, specifically on the number of eligible voters. During the electoral process, the candidate who garners the highest number of votes assumes legitimate authority to govern the electorate. The primary ethical responsibility of elected

representatives lies in ensuring the welfare and protection of citizens and the state. At the ground level, this thump rule appears pragmatic and robust, particularly when practiced within a limited group of individuals who share comparable socio-cultural and economic circumstances. However, as democracy is implemented among a vast population characterized by rigidity, chauvinism, immaturity, and diversity in terms of language, culture, social dynamics, and economic disparities, several inherent ethical flaws emerge, compounded by external threats that undermine the ethical foundation of democracy and its beneficiaries. This article explores a range of ethical dilemmas and challenges that raise doubts about the effectiveness of democracy as a form of governance. Let us discuss below some of the key ethical issues we face in the modern democratic system.

3.1 Rational Ignorance of Voters

The primary ethical challenge of ‘rational voter ignorance’ refers to a situation where voters intentionally opt not to become informed, engaged, or familiar with the issues or affairs of the nation. They do this under the assumption that the cost of acquiring information, including the expenditure of time and effort, outweighs the potential benefits of being informed (Congleton 35). The idea of ‘rational ignorance’ gained currency in the academic circle when Anthony Downs introduced it in 1957. He said, “It is irrational (for individuals) to be politically informed because the low return from data simply does not justify their costs in time and other resources” (Downs 149). This can be considered as an unethical practice as the success of any democracy rests upon the active and rational participation of the citizens. Apart from this, an individual who has spent a lot of time and effort to get to know about the political problems out of passion or commitment towards oneself or the nation, might feel ethically diluted, upset and disappointed after realizing that his or her one vote will have only equal value and impact with that of millions of rationally ignorant voters. This makes the individual reconsider whether to invest so much time and effort from next time onwards. When a major chunk of the population chooses to be unethical by being rationally ignorant, democracy will become just a mockery whereby a group of unaware and disinterested people come together to elect one among themselves to represent, pursue and defend their and nation’s interest. An empirical study conducted by Fernanda

Leite, Lopez, De Leon and Renata Rizzi in Brazil, which was published in *American Economic Journal* in 2014, corroborated the 'rational ignorance hypothesis' put forward by Anthony Downs way back in 1957 (Leone and Rizzi 382). Since the voters are not taking the effort of background check-ups of the candidates, unethical personalities, corrupt individuals, criminals, profit-oriented business people, irresponsible citizens become the elected representatives of the people, who subsequently run the government never minding the sacred code of 'wellbeing of citizens and nation'.

3.2 Manipulation by the Media House and Social Media

The media, frequently regarded as the fourth estate of democracy, bears the primary ethical duty of informing the uninformed, educating the uneducated, reporting on overlooked events, and raising awareness among the public about political issues. But if the fourth estate compromises its primary duty on ethical grounds (Lewin and Franklin 02), the consequence will, no doubt, be fatal. Due to factors like disinterest, cost-benefit evaluation, or a lack of personal or emotional bond, individuals often avoid delving into political issues or understanding candidates. Consequently, they rely on the media's interpretation and information about various political matters cum candidates. This psychological state of 'dependence on media for decision-making' can be exploited by media organizations through the presentation of news or information tailored to specific audience preferences, a practice that is ethically questionable. This can also be done for business and political reasons supplemented by profit or survival. Moreover, in order to increase the viewership, readership or audiences, the media house tends to unethically sensitize the news in such a way that people get misguided and misinformed. Exploiting the opportunities presented by the modern internet era, where information can be disseminated and validated within seconds, media outlets sometimes manipulate news and information to serve their own interests. This can misguide and misinform the impulsive and easily swayed general public for the media's personal gain. One good example for the same was the 2016 US election where, "throughout his campaign, Trump manipulated and managed the media in numerous ways" (Victor 118).

The manipulation of media can be also done by individuals through the platform of social media. The spread of false messages,

trolls, fabricated information, fake videos, memes etc. by propagandists can have an impressive impact on the voting pattern of common people apart from sowing the seeds of extremism, polarization and fragmentation. The dissemination of hate speech, forged information, fabricated content, and serpentine campaigns through social media has changed the ethical landscape and inherent character of media and subsequently that of popular democracy. Initially, social media was hailed as a platform that expanded and bolstered the foundations of democracy. It allowed individuals to voice their political preferences and opinions at their own pace and convenience, offering increased transparency, accountability, and accessibility to the general public. However, over time, this initial euphoria began to wane as social media started being utilized as a tool to manipulate and influence voters. When the common mass does not take the effort to scrutinize and verify the news, memes, trolls and videos that they receive through social media, citizens of democracy become the poor victims of propagandists and sectarian politicization. Social media platforms often lack fixed, verifiable facts because as content is shared from one individual to another, it becomes customized to suit the preferences and interests of the viewers (Sunstein 83).

3.3 Money-Driven Elections

Multi-party democracies are known for their electoral politics, where every party and candidate compete to garner the support of the largest possible number of voters. They do so by making captivating promises and enhancing the image of their leaders and parties through eloquent speeches that highlight their abilities and achievements. Simultaneously, they may also attempt to tarnish the reputation of opposition leaders and their political parties through both legitimate and fabricated allegations. However, in transitional democracies like India, certain unique factors come into play. Wealthy political parties with substantial financial resources frequently employ a wide range of unethical tactics to attract voters. As a result, many prominent candidates amass a significant portion of their campaign funds through various questionable methods, including receiving contributions from corporates, government contractors, liquor barons, bootleggers, real estate tycoons and others who have accumulated substantial wealth through unethical practices (Williams 02). One of the most potent strategies employed by influential

candidates and political parties to secure the backing of neutral individuals or those with limited education, is to entice them with monetary incentives. Consequently, many of these voters, unaware of the significance of their votes, are often inclined to sell their votes, blatantly disregarding the ethical and moral principles of electoral democracy.

Besides vote purchase, money power unethically flexes its muscle in other aspects also. It is used for creating a 'shock and awe effect' in voters' psyche. To create it, the political parties expose certain scandals of the incumbent political party where a large sum of money is involved and convert this psychological shock into votes. The 2G spectrum scandal, coal scam, commonwealth scandal etc. of the incumbent government proved beneficial for Narendra Modi in the 2014 elections in India (Chhibber and Verma 50). They create an awe effect in the hearts and minds of voters as well as supporters; almost all the political parties invest a huge amount of money in organizing colourful rallies, conducting massive public meetings, hoarding large banners, advertising and addressing the people through TV, Radio and Internet etc. (Pye 213). The elections driven by the power of money are directly posing ethical case against democracy.

3.4 Populism

In the 21st century, populism occupies significant positions in the lexicon of political science and electoral politics. The term is used to denote the democratic and republican candidates of the United States, opposition parties in England and left-wing presidents in Latin America. Cas Mudde explains populism as, "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 6). Depending upon the political goals, time and resources available, nature of the political problems, the socio-cultural background of the candidates and voters, the characteristics and performance of populism will change.

Democracy is vulnerable to getting trapped in the unethical cobwebs of populists. Indeed, democracy operates smoothly when both the ruling and opposition parties function with vigilance and tolerance. But when the populists come to power through democratic

means, they choose to eliminate the opposition in order to reiterate their rule eternally. The populist measures like changing the electoral law, parliamentary rules, party funding etc. initiated by Viktor Orban in Hungary is a classic example of the same (Mudde 91). Democracy is also a form of government which stands out from other forms of government for its features of freedom of speech and expression. It is on the bedrock of dissent and assent, democracy climbs the ladder of maturity.

Impartial voting, accountable representatives, transparent governance and inclusive policy decisions are some of the prerequisites for a successful democracy. But when unethical populists helm the affairs of the state, these essential characteristics and prerequisites of a successful democracy will get diluted and weakened. The populist will deploy the means of misinformation, false allegation, forgery, conspiracy, manipulative media, information warfare, partisan intelligence services, tweaked reports etc. to make their rule stable, unchallenged and permanent (Kaltwasser and Rovira 03). Democracy in the modern world of globalization and the internet is highly vulnerable to dilution and erosion. Due to the advent of populist and their unethical aggrandizement strategies, the basic credentials of democracy are getting compromised in order to feed the power hungry politicians. When the established and successfully running democratic nation falls in the hands of populists, the nature and existence of global democracy in theory and practice gets threatened and it will subsequently lead to the decline of democratic principles (Gunitsk 07).

4. Ethical Society as a Means to Strengthen Democracy

Despite the high regard and veneration that political scientists bestow upon democracy as the foremost and widely accepted form of government, current global developments reveal that democracies face a multitude of challenges. A potential remedy to surmount these challenges lies in the establishment of an ethical society which upholds the principles of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. By converting democratic society into an ethical society, trust and accountability prevail upon democratic processes. When citizens, political institutions, and leaders abide by ethical principles such as transparency, honesty, and integrity, trust is built. Citizens are more likely to actively participate in the democratic process and support its

functioning when they have confidence in their leaders' adherence to ethical standards. Ethical values inspire individuals to partake in civic responsibilities, exercise their voting rights, and engage in constructive political discourse. The participation of well-informed and ethical citizens in democratic processes contributes to the robustness of decision-making and strengthens the legitimacy of democratic outcomes. Ethical values such as mutual respect, open dialogue, and constructive debate encourage the development of consensus among differing viewpoints. This consensus-building process enables stable governance, effective problem-solving, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts within society. The ensuing section of this research article endeavours to elucidate the pivotal role of ethics and the cultivation of an ethical society in effectively addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by democratic systems.

4.1 Government and Common Good

The notion and implementation of the common good hold profound significance within the framework of humans as social beings. Given the inherent interdependence among individuals for survival and well-being, the common good carries substantial ethical implications across various dimensions of human existence, including the political sphere. As social living aims to foster mutual benefits, no individual can dismiss the importance of the common good, whereby collective welfare is prioritized and utilities are created for the advantage of society as a whole. When a society deviates from the principles underpinning the common good, it devolves into an unethical state, and individuals may seek to reform, modify, break away from, or dissolve it. This principle applies to democracy as well.

To fortify democracy, both the governed and the governing must earnestly abide by the ethical principles of the common good. Such adherence cultivates an emotional attachment and commitment among individuals toward the functioning and success of democracy as a viable form of governance. When citizens internalize democracy as a product rooted in ethical dimensions of the common good, they are emboldened to protect and uphold it fervently. Any attempts to undermine democracy, whether by those in positions of power or ordinary citizens driven by vested interests, would be subject to reformation, modification, or dissolution through the legal and orderly mechanisms afforded by democratic systems. Since the

common good provides the guiding principles for peaceful coexistence in public life, its presence is imperative for the establishment of an ethical society. In the presence of an ethical society alone, the pillars of democracy stand strong and unwavering.

4.2 Open and Transparent Government

Openness and transparency are indispensable ethical principles that hold the potential to bolster the efficacy of democratic systems. By incorporating a culture of transparency into the activities of those in positions of power within a democracy, it inherently fosters a sense of accountability among them. This accountability can arise from the fear of scrutiny by vigilant citizens or from a desire to augment their credibility and popularity among voters. Mechanisms such as e-governance, the Right to Information, the Citizens Charter, the vigilant presence of anti-corruption bodies, and the establishment of public service rights for citizens represent avenues through which openness and transparency can be ingrained into the functioning of government. Such ethical practices not only cultivate trust among voters in their representatives but also contribute to the overall trust in the democratic system itself.

4.3 Ethical Media

The media plays a crucial role in establishing an ethical democratic society. However, to fulfil this role effectively, media organizations must prioritize accountability, regularity, fairness and transparency. Any democracy that prioritizes secrecy over transparency undermines its own purpose, and this also applies to the media. In the pursuit of secrecy, business ethics, and profitability, many media outlets refrain from disclosing their financial transactions to the public, which can be seen as hypocritical. This lack of transparency may erode the media's credibility (Plaisance 187).

In an ethical society, higher educational institutions that offer degrees in Media and Communication should undergo a paradigm shift by restructuring their curriculum. They should educate aspiring media graduates on media ethics, equip them with problem-solving techniques, and encourage critical analysis of issues with solution-oriented approaches. These institutions should also educate and empower the public, particularly the youth, with forward-thinking goals, emphasizing integrity and humanism. Such initiatives will

inherently fortify the foundations of democracy. Furthermore, the rise of social media as a potent force and the opening of economic opportunities provides a platform for ethical and educated media professionals to launch their independent and unbiased media outlets (Schultz 87).

To truly enhance the role of media in a democracy, popular media outlets should be liberated from bureaucratic constraints and archaic censorship laws. Legislations should not only guarantee freedom of expression but also protect citizens, safeguarding them from undue harassment by the state. With media acting as the guardian and protector of democracy, an ethical society will strive to establish media as a formidable fourth estate within the democratic landscape.

4.4 Counter Money-Driven Elections

The persistence of voter ignorance regarding the significance of their votes, coupled with the prevalent culture of accepting money in exchange for votes, poses a formidable challenge in eradicating the abuse of money in elections. However, allowing this practice to continue unabated will gradually erode the foundations of democracy. In many transitional democracies, individuals with a strong moral compass often find themselves unable to amass the necessary funds to contest even in municipal elections, thereby being forced to take a backseat. As a result, sincere and concerned citizens who intend to make a positive impact on politics through their votes are left feeling helpless (Vachana and Roy 29).

To combat the menace of illicit money in elections and preserve democracy, it is imperative to strive for the establishment of an ethical society. Higher educational institutions should undertake comprehensive research to analyze the causes and propose remedies to address this issue. In-depth multidimensional case studies, supported by updated data and advanced statistical tools, will form a solid foundation for understanding the problem and developing effective solutions.

The Election Commission, an independent body responsible for conducting free and fair elections, should utilize its authority to take action against parties and candidates engaged in distributing money for votes. Recognizing one's strength and taking responsibility is essential in countering this issue. Notably, T.N. Seshan, during his

tenure as the Chief Election Commissioner of India, implemented stringent measures that led to successful elections. Although he garnered admiration from many, corrupt political leaders held him in contempt (Gilmartin 247).

There is also a pressing need to educate politically unaware and illiterate individuals, particularly first-generation and first-time voters, about the significance of voting. Without understanding the transformative power of their votes, which can shape the destiny of future generations, they often neglect this crucial civic duty. Teachers in schools and colleges across all constituencies should be trained on democratic values and encouraged to conduct voter outreach programs, thereby fostering voter awareness in every nook and corner of towns and villages. These efforts within an ethical society will yield long-term dividends.

Furthermore, an ethical society would facilitate students' union elections in universities and colleges to cultivate and train young leaders. At the institutional level, young voters should be educated on the electoral process, democratic principles, and essential qualities of leadership such as transparency, accountability, and other virtues. This comprehensive approach aims to nurture a positive and productive political activism culture among the younger generation, ultimately replacing the practice of selecting leaders through cinema theatres, communal riots and caste violence.

Committed non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social activists, and youth with a spirit of sacrifice within the ethical society must unite their efforts to organize campaigns for promoting ethics in politics. These initiatives should focus on advocating high ideals such as refraining from accepting money or freebies, voting with self-respect, and emphasizing the importance of hard work and value-based decision-making.

4.6 Ethical Voting Behaviour

From an ethical standpoint, voting should not be likened to selecting a dress from a showroom. When someone makes a choice about a dress, respective individual will only bear the consequences of his choice. In contrast, voting has consequences that extend beyond the individual realm. The choice of a candidate in an election affects the entire constituency and state. If an individual base the vote solely on considerations of religion, gender, caste, or other identities, ignoring

the candidate's negative attributes, it demonstrates unethical behaviour. Moreover, such a choice will have implications for the effective functioning of the state. In a democracy, individuals do not cast votes exclusively for their own interests; each vote holds significance and contributes to a collective impact. Ethical voting involves nurturing a civic sense of active engagement in the electoral process, abstaining from trading votes for personal gain or selfish motives, maintaining impartiality, and casting votes solely based on the merits of the candidate.

4.7 Ethical Functioning of Political Parties

Political parties play a crucial role in the functioning of democracy. The actions of political parties, their leaders, candidates, members, volunteers, ideology and propaganda can even decide the fate of democracy as a successful form of government or the worst one. Ethical conduct by political parties involves conducting fair intra-party elections, instilling ethical values in the general public regarding elections, endorsing and upholding the principles of free and fair elections, cooperating with election authorities, respecting the privacy of candidates and citizens, avoiding practices such as paid news, booth capturing, impersonation, bribing, hate speeches, and demonstrating accountability and sincerity post-election. The ethical functioning of political parties thus serves to stabilize, internalize, and fortify democracy.

5. Conclusion

The intricate interplay between ethics and democracy highlights the fact that justice, fairness and inclusivity build trust among citizens, foster social cohesion, and uphold democratic principles. It calls on policymakers, educators, and citizens to navigate the complexities of modern political frameworks, fostering a collective ethos that goes beyond individual interests. The implications extend broadly, encompassing social justice, political stability, and the overall well-being of a nation. In a world grappling with diverse challenges, ethical consciousness emerges not only as a philosophical ideal but also as a practical necessity for sustaining democracy. Therefore, we strongly advocate for ethical education and the promotion of moral leadership, instilling a sense of responsibility in individuals to contribute to the shared ethical foundation vital for thriving democracies. Ethico-

political societies should act as protective strongholds, defending democracy against anti-democratic influences. Hence, prioritizing efforts to cultivate and uphold ethical principles is crucial for the enduring success of democratic systems in the contemporary world.

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