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The Influence of Political Censorship on the Integrity of Elections and the Selection of Government Officials

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This paper explores the consequences of political censorship on the legitimacy of electoral processes and government formation. It gives an overview of the mechanisms of censorship, such as media, information manipulation, and the stifling of opposition voices, to weigh their impact on democratic practices. Using case studies and interviews, the study seeks to uncover the relationship between political censorship and electoral integrity. The paper also aims to find out to what extent a government can censor any kind of information and how it can affect a person's ability to decide on which party to vote for. When censorship affects the decision of a voter then is it fair and lawful? The paper intends to find answers to such questions that affect or interact with concepts of intellectual censorship and political theology. The paper's main objective is to analyze the relationship between political theology and censorship to reach a conclusion regarding whether or not censorship actually affects one's decision to vote.

Keywords: *censorship, elections, government, selection.*

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Political censorship' is ambiguous and encompasses multiple definitions. To understand political censorship, one has to first understand censorship and how it can be political in nature or politically used. Censorship is generally the act of restricting information,

ideas and expressions and their flow in the general media for multiple reasons based on certain situations and requirements.

Restricting certain information, ideas and expressions for the purpose of influencing public opinion to be in favor of those in power or such positions is what can be briefly described as political censorship. There are multiple ways in which political censorship takes place, starting from banning films, books and articles to hiding information of all sorts that could negatively affect the government in power.

In a democracy where the citizens of the nation are the ones that choose their government, are the ones that are hugely affected by censorship of information. When any sort of information that might negatively impact the government in power is censored and isn't allowed to flow through media then the people will have limited to no scope for criticizing the government and would generally choose to elect it back into power rather than electing a new government, thus resulting in an unfair and exploitive practice of censorship.

In contemporary politics, censorship of information plays a huge role but unlike in the past to hide or censor any information in the present day is a complicated and extensive process. In the modern day, the flow of information and ideas is pretty constant and immediate. One living in the United States can know what has happened in India just by simply following a couple of social media pages. In a world where information is circulating at a fast pace the government's ability to restrict or retain information is limited, this paper is meant to find out how effective this limited ability of censorship available to the government can influence electoral integrity.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CENSORSHIP

Over the course of time, different nations and numerous political organisations have used political censorship as a tool to manipulate people. Political censorship works as a medium for political organisations or nations to stop the voice of common people suppress their ideas or restrict their source of information. Those who hold offices of power use this to control people's opinions and protect the interests of those people who hold these offices of power. Freedom of speech, which is a very basic right of people and one of the pillars of democracy gets hampered

by these people in power to control people's perspectives; if it goes against any government policies or in order to consolidate any authority who tries to go against the government or any political organisation.

There are several different ways in which powerful people use political censorships those different ways are:

Media Censorship: Media works as a backbone of democracy, it becomes the voice of common people, and this is the primary organ that gets affected by political censorship most. Government or political organisations try to control or manipulate traditional news outlets such as newspapers, television, radio, etc.¹

Internet Censorship: In this growing era of technology, the internet has become a very vital tool in spreading information. Government or political organisations try to control people's ideas by employing online censorship through blocking, filtering, and monitoring of websites and social media. This can also include restricting access to news sites, social media, and other different communication apps.²

Surveillance: Mass surveillance activities are used to look after people's activities on the internet and social media. This helps to know the general perspective of people and will eventually help in controlling people's ideas.

Content Removal: Governments tend to remove certain content from the internet that goes against their ideas or policies.

Arrest and Persecution: Political activists, journalists, and certain activities like criticizing the government may lead to arrest, detention and even torture that further leads to the degradation of freedom of speech and expression.

¹ Glenn Halbrooks, 'How Media Censorship Affects the News You See' *ThoughtCo.* (14 July 2020) <<https://www.thoughtco.com/how-media-censorship-affects-the-news-you-see-2315162#:~:text=Censorship%20the%20media%20is%20the%20suppression%2C%20alteration%2C%20or,politically%20unacceptable%2C%20or%20a%20threat%20to%20national%20security.>> accessed 05 December 2023

² Ivana Vojinovic, 'Internet Censorship: Definition, Types, and How It Can Affect You' (*DataProt*, 06 May 2023) <<https://dataprot.net/articles/what-is-internet-censorship/>> accessed 05 December 2023

The powerful people who use tools like political censorship often give justifications like those that they are doing it for national security, to maintain public order, to prevent the spread of misinformation, etc.

In the Historical context, political censorship can be traced way back. In ancient Greece and Rome, rulers used to take control of the information that was used to spread especially if that information challenged their rule or authority. The Roman Catholic Church, during the time of the Inquisition, used to engage in censorship to suppress the ideas that used to contradict the doctrine of the Church. The Enlightenment era brought a wave of freedom of speech and expression but even during that time many European governments and the Catholic Church used censorship to control people's ideas and way of thinking. The era of the 20th century saw a wave of political censorship during the Soviet era and Nazi Germany era. During the Cold War era, both the United States and the Soviet Union used intense political ideologies and censorship to propagate their ideas and thoughts among people of their respective countries and alliances.³

If we talk in terms of global context, there are various examples of different countries that practice political censorship in their countries. In Asia, many countries follow political censorship. For example, China has very strict rules regarding political censorship, they use a technology known as 'The Great Firewall' to control access to information. Countries like North Korea do not have freedom of speech and expression. Several Middle Eastern countries have a history of using political censorship to suppress the voice of their opposition. In Africa, political censorship is a matter of great concern as many different countries use it to suppress independent journalists and activists. In Latin America, various countries have observed political censorship, especially during civil conflicts. Comparatively, Europe has witnessed less political censorship but still, they have censorship in the name of national security.⁴

³ 'History of Censorship' (*Britannica*) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/censorship/History-of-censorship>> accessed 05 December 2023

⁴ Paul Bischoff, 'Internet Censorship 2023: A Global Map of Internet Restrictions' (*comparitech*, 16 October 2023) <<https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/internet-censorship-map/>> accessed 05 December 2023

The role of political censorship in restricting freedom of expression is significant and it has very far-reaching impacts such as:

1. Political censorship restricts access to legit information that leads to affect the decision-making process of the common people. It limits the scope of correct information, and people tend to make wrong decisions.
2. It tends to suppress the voices that go against the government or powerful organisations, political censorship hampers the voices of people such as journalists, activists, and academics people, which again leads to affecting the decision-making process of common people.⁵
3. Media is referred to as one of the pillars of democracy and it is the mirror of any country, if the mirror is not able to reflect the defects, then how are we supposed to correct ourselves? Freedom of speech and expression plays a very crucial role in this, because criticism is one of the factors of success, if we do not receive feedback then how are we supposed to convert it into feedforward? Political censorship tends to undermine democracy and hamper the freedom of speech and expression.
4. Freedom of speech and expression is a fundamental right and when political censorship infringes these rights, it violates one of the basic rights of any common citizen. It tends to violate human rights and hampers their proper way of living.

THE MECHANISMS OF POLITICAL CENSORSHIP

Political censorship can take various forms and it involves several different methods and mechanisms. It can be implemented in different ways such as:

⁵ Elizabeth R. Purdy, 'Censorship' (*Free Speech Centre*) <<https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/article/censorship/>> accessed 05 December 2023

1. Internet and Social Media Control -

- **Content Blocking:** The government tends to block different websites, different social media platforms, or any specific content that is deemed to be against their will or interest. They try to do these things through firewalls, content filtering and domain bans.⁶
- **Internet Shutdowns:** In extreme cases, the government can order the complete shutdown of internet services in different parts of the country, during the spread of misinformation or organization of protests. For example, very recently in India, there was widespread violence in the state of Manipur in which the government initiated the complete shutdown of the internet due to the circulation of misinformation.

2. Media Ownership and Control -

- **State-Owned Media:** The government sometimes may own or try to heavily influence media outlets, which allows them to control common citizens' opinions on certain national topics. For example, In Russia, there is a media outlet namely 'Channel One' which is a national network, it is 51% owned by publicly owned and 49% privately owned. Then there is another news channel namely 'Rossiya' which is 100% state-owned.
- **Censorship of Private Media:** Through regulatory bodies or various other means, the government tries to pressurize private media entities. This forces private media outlets to work under the directives of the government, otherwise they may even face repercussions.⁷

3. Laws and Regulations -

- **Laws restricting Free Speech:** Authoritarian governments try to restrict free speech and expression of common people so that they cannot comment negatively about the government and its policies. The best example of this is North Korea. In North Korea, no one can go against the dictator, we Indians can relate it very closely because of the 1975

⁶ Jennifer Cobbe, 'Algorithmic Censorship by Social Platforms: Power and Resistance' (2021) 34 Philosophy & Technology <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-020-00429-0>> accessed 08 December 2023

⁷ *Ibid*

Emergency, in which Indira Gandhi acted as a 'Legal Dictator'. 'Legal Dictator' refers to when any head acts as a dictator within the rights of our constitution. Article 352, allows emergency on legal grounds. Even now India has few legal grounds for censorship.

- **Registration and Licensing:** The government sometimes makes media outlets get registration or obtain licenses so that they can exert their control on these outlets by granting or denying these permits.⁸

4. Surveillance and Monitoring -

- **Mass Surveillance:** Governments tend to do mass surveillance on their citizen like phone tapping, surveillance of digital communications, and tracking their physical movements to know their activities.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** The government tries to collect as much data as possible and tries to analyze the mindset of its people, which eventually helps them manipulate their minds.⁹

5. Cyberattacks and Hacking -

- **State-Sponsored Hacking:** Governments may use state-run cyberattacking tools to get access to data of their opposition. Those who go against their wish, they try to hack their data and manipulate them.
- **Distributed Denial of Service (DODS) attacks:** These attacks try to overload social media and websites, which makes these websites and other sites completely inaccessible.¹⁰

6. Propaganda and Disinformation -

- **State-Sponsored Propaganda:** Governments may try to use state-run media to propagate misinformation to manipulate the thoughts of their citizen.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*

- **Disinformation Campaigns:** Governments try to create or spread false information or manipulate social media to spread mistrust among the public.

7. Violence and Intimidation -

- **Physical Attacks:** Opposition figures, Journalists, activists, or academic people may face physical attacks or harassment from the government, if they go against their policies.
- **Legal Prosecution:** Legal actions such as imprisonment, arrests, and harassment may happen to the people who try to go against the government or political organizations.

Society is becoming digital day by day with all the debates, and conversations, now taking place on online platforms, making these platforms extremely important for the lives of common people as these things help us in becoming more aware and connect to people from different countries. They also make us vulnerable by becoming our biggest manipulative tool. As we have stated, powerful people tend to use this as a tool to manipulate us, control or affect our thinking process, making it in their favor. As we stated, different methods that governments, powerful people, or political organizations use to manipulate common citizens tend to violate human rights and infringe on our very basic fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression.

POLITICAL CENSORSHIP AND ITS EFFECT

Understanding political censorship and its mechanisms has given us an overview for us to understand the effect it has on the integrity of democratic processes and electoral integrity. The fieldwork collected indicates that the effect of political censorship is essentially present but is not observed in a direct or straight manner. Put simply the effect of political censorship is not directly on the decision of whom to vote but rather its effect is seen on the overall thought process of the person.

Political censorship inherently changes the way a person thinks about what is right and what is wrong. One's ability to understand or comprehend the reason behind the actions of a certain person in power or government is completely dependent on the education and information available or provided to the person. In democratic nations such as the United States and India

the government has control over the educational policies of the nation, in such countries the government has full discretion on what has to be taught in the educational institutions of the nation. When the government has full control over the study material and syllabus that has to be taught to students, it also has the power to censor any kind of influential, revolutionary, or provocative information/publishing. This effectively is brainwashing children into thinking the actions of the government in power are what is politically right. The very base of a human's thinking ability which is education and knowledge is being affected in such situations. While education of a person determines one's understanding of what is politically right or wrong the information a person has access to is the deciding or major factor that influences one's ability to decide if his/her political view of a party is in reality the same as what they think.

One of the best yet critical examples that one can give is that of the perspective of Gandhi in India. As taught to students through their subjects and assisting materials such as textbooks, Ghandhi is a great and influential personality who obtained freedom for the nation through non-violence but in reality, when learning about and understanding the long political scenario that had happened during the early 20th century, we can conclude that Ghandhi as a strong believer in his philosophy of non-violence had very minimal effect on the decision of the British colonizers to give freedom. Yes, Gandhi played a role in the freedom movement but the critique arises about why the actions of other freedom fighters have been omitted or rationed.

Such examples show that political censorship isn't just hiding away and banning information but it is deeper manipulation of the information that is being fed to young and old minds alike through multiple means. While education plays a major role in developing a person's understanding of what is right and wrong, the information that is, flowing through their surrounding defines their ability to comprehend if or not what they think is right or wrong. If a person has no or very limited access to information which can happen due to a multitude of reasons in large democratic nations such as India and China, there is a definite fallacy in his/her understanding of what is politically right and wrong.

In such conditions, the censorship of critical and ignominious information has already affected the mindsets of the majority population in thinking about what is advantageous to the party in

power. After trying to understand whether or not political censorship affects democratic processes such as elections, it can be concluded that it is more of a paradox as there is no conclusive proof of whether as recorded one sticks to his/her statement and votes accordingly.

When speaking about its consequences on electoral integrity, it can be briefly described as effective yet unseen as the understanding of the concept of political censorship is complicated and it is inconspicuous. One could say that democracy is only a front for an authoritarian government when doubts regarding the extent of censorship are presented. Countries like China, the United States, Latin democracies and India are some examples where we can see different levels of political censorship taking place and understand what kind of effect these have on their respective democratic practices.

CONCLUSION

According to us, political censorship is a very complex phenomenon and a very controversial issue that has far-reaching impacts on different societies, it affects democracy, freedom of speech and expression and various other things. While political censorship mustn't be illegally disseminated, it also raises very serious issues or concerns first and foremost it raises questions on freedom of speech and expression, which is a very basic fundamental of any human being who wishes betterment of this society, political censorship tries to infringe that very basic right, these rights should not get affect by this. Secondly, it affects accountability and transparency, the entities, private or government should maintain accountability and most importantly they should be transparent with their work, if this is not maintained then it is very difficult to believe in these entities. Thirdly, political censorship can very easily be misused so; the government should come up with some laws that regulate political censorship. Fourthly, since we are in the growing era of technology, misinformation can be spread very rapidly so we need to try to curtail it (taking the viewpoints of people through interviews). Finally, we conclude by saying that political censorship has both positive and negative aspects, if we talk about positive aspects this is the best tool to get rid of riots-like situations and if we talk about negative aspects, there is a very long list. Therefore, the government should come up with some rules to maintain or grow the positiveness of political censorship.