Navigating to freedom: What can influence people to vote?

Do most citizens value freedom of choice to maximise their well-being in preferring certain parties or candidates vis-à-vis others?

By DEEPAHSU MOHAN, Apr 11, 2019

As India begins voting in phases from this week for the 2019 General Elections, in a country, where voting population exceeds 900 million people, it is difficult to ascertain any set of core reasons or common expectations on which Indians actually vote.

Still, it is true that – regardless of one’s social and economic position – most citizens cast their vote hope in expectation to enjoy two goals: a) getting new economic (or social) opportunities for greater economic and personal security; and b) as a result of seeking a) enjoy greater freedom of choice.

Both these goals are linked and consequently connected with maximising a voter’s well-being over time. Access to new opportunities – through higher income/job/business/education etc, is directly connected with one’s ability to exercise a greater freedom of choice and agency. But sometimes while one may realise this, (s)he may not know how to get there (or maximise her/his freedom). Consider a few examples.

Rajesh is suffering from a liver disease and is prescribed regular medication by his doctor. While Rajesh prefers to have his medicines on time, he is often forgetful and requires constant reminders. The government doctor- who Rajesh sought advice from- allows Rajesh to sign up for a text message app facility launched by the government, which assists patients in periodically reminding about their medication schedules (sending regular texts as reminders) during the prescribed period. Signing up for the app has worked well for (forgetful) patients like Rajesh in recovering swiftly.
Amit teaches at a school where most teachers are entitled to a long-term retirement saving plan. While Amit prefers to sign up for the offered plan – willing to pay necessary premium – she is still confused on the process of actually signing up for it and the time involved in coordinating with school’s human resource department (say, in getting the required process done). The school institutes an automatic default-sign up process for the retirement-saving programme, whereby, all employees to the school, are automatically signed up to the saving plan – paying the required premium from their salary. They have the choice to opt-out of the programme at any point.

In both cases here, navigational nudges or interventions allow both individuals to maximise their goals with a freedom to choose and without being compelled to do so (i.e. in a non-coercive way). Choice architects – the doctor and the school – allow Rajesh and Amit to exercise their freedom of choice and helping in taking better care of oneself (Rajesh) or plan one’s future (Amit) with navigational nudges.

Navigating towards freedom
The concepts of navigation and a nudge approach have been explained in much detail across recent works of Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, including their role in designing informed choice-architectures for implementing desired (social) policy scenarios. A nudge approach, according to Sunstein, with minimal interference or obstruction to freedom of choice, allows governments to help citizens navigate with greater ease towards a desired path (healthy life, social protection etc.) while removing pre-existing obstacles to their well-being (those seen otherwise as un-freedoms).

But why is navigability important in helping one increase her/his freedom of choice?

In an age when excess of information makes choice difficult for most people, navigability holds key in enabling a citizen to find what (s)he reasons to value. There are times when most citizens do value freedom of choice but are quite clueless on how to get it or what to do with it (if they are guaranteed to it in their constitution). Similarly, citizens may articulate abstract goals with little knowledge of specifics involved (i.e. abstract goals for a happy life, good job, healthy life-style etc. without knowing how to get there).

Navigation, through certain processes and instituted mechanisms, acts as a GPS device in guiding citizens from point A to point B without coercing one to follow that path itself. In other words, a citizen can simply ignore the advised direction of the government on a reform or given policy, but if followed (or referred to), it should simply help her/him in the best (and most predictable) way possible.
**Party preference based on navigability**

Similarly, electorally formed governments – as a nation’s chief choice architect – must feature parties that project to adopt navigational nudges in designing schemes or social programmes, making individuals (or a target group) attain desired goals, enjoy freedom as part of what they value.

The key question is:
Which party (or leader) can help navigate citizens to these goals and design a better choice-architecture (i.e. systemic environment helping citizens to make desirable choices)?

In India’s current electoral context, at the national level, whether it is an alliance led by the Indian National Congress or one led by the BJP government, either political group, are offering themselves as: better choice-architects with a plan to help citizens navigate better.

From a national perspective, Indian National Congress’ manifesto broadly seeks to provide greater emphasis on promoting social welfare opportunities (through basic income plans like NYAY to the poor), while BJP – as the incumbent in power, seeks to offer greater push for infrastructural development and capacity-building (in areas of defence, national security etc.). At least, that’s the crux behind both national party’s visions.

The navigational path offered by each party (including regional parties) – in terms of stated manifestos or emphasis on welfare programmes – offers a mixed choice architecture to voters with a limited information on the extent to which reduction of existing unfreedoms (unemployment, poverty, inaccessibility to social services etc.) will happen, helping citizens to enjoy a greater freedom of choice in the future. Patronising the poor by solely offering higher income/loan waivers or other unilateral transfers does very little for the poor in terms of helping them navigate towards greater upward mobility. For example, in case of a plan like NYAY (giving basic income to poor households), complimentary emphasis on public provisioning of other basic services (health, education, housing) is warranted equally in letting the poor maximise their freedom of choice (or widen their choice-architecture) in the future with basic capabilities.

Therefore, whether it is NYAY, PM’s Kisan Samidhi Yojana or UJJWALA, it is difficult to understand how target groups – poor households, small farmers and women – can utilise minimum cash (or kind) support in significantly increasing their navigability to get out of the poverty (or debt) trap. There are other interventions required to improve each group’s navigability.

At the same time, navigational designs embedded in such schemes can work only in an environment that is cultivated with a degree of implementable autonomy, without absolute coercion and allowing independent monitoring progress of policies to gauge the extent to which each designed scheme enhances a target
recipient’s well-being (as intended). This is one area where the incumbent BJP government offers a troubling record (at least in the recent past).

Whichever political party can actually position itself in ensuring a navigational path of growth and reform design (mapped with maximum freedom, well-being and minimal coercion) must be preferred as an electoral choice for voters. Of course, any absolute notion of freedom of choice has its limitations as well (say from problems of self-control, addiction etc.) that requires a different set of interventions (including legal action). Still, every citizen – at a basic level – incrementally reasons to value a wider-choice architecture and greater freedom to choose.

Even so, while freedom of choice must be cherished, cherishing it is hardly enough. Interventions in forms of navigational nudges help citizens in moving from one point to another (for their well-being) and elected governments – as chief-architects – must carefully construct such interventions (as some form of GPS device), which allows people to get what they want and maximise their preferences, but do so in a non-coercive way. Any path designed to maximise freedoms for citizen’s future cannot (should not) make them (or any group) traverse via un-freedoms now.

Views are personal.

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