

Democracy shouldn't be limited to elections

Voter participation in the 2024 UK election was 60 per cent, the lowest in over 20 years.

Mukulika Banerjee argues that the UK needs to cultivate a democratic culture that engages citizens on political issues beyond just the elections. Otherwise, democracy and its institutions are in danger of disintegration.

For over 20 years I have worked on democracy in rural India, as a social anthropologist. But in the recent UK general election, for the first time I canvassed to support a party candidate, in my own London constituency. This involved knocking on doors, asking voters whether they had decided who to vote for yet and what issues were of most concern to them. What I found was disturbing.

Whereas in India one can have an informed and lively political discussion with almost anyone, no matter how poor or illiterate, here in mostly comfortable suburban England some people did not even know that a national election was imminent, and many others didn't care, dismissing all parties as "the same" or all politicians as self-serving.

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My experience aligns with the low 60 per cent [national turnout](#), the second lowest since 2001 – despite UK polling stations being just a short walk away for most people.

What does this suggest about the state of democracy in Britain? Such apathy seems to reflect a broad disengagement with politics and, I would argue, a lack of understanding

of the role of an individual citizen in a country's democratic politics.

After the 2020 US elections, when Trump was defeated, Obama gave a salutary [message](#). He began by thanking voters for voting, volunteering and organising during the election, "Your efforts made a difference. Enjoy this moment." But he went on to say: "Then stay engaged. I know it can be exhausting. But for this democracy to endure, it requires our active citizenship and sustained focus on the issues – not just in election season, but all the days in between".

This idea of "active citizenship" is what the young Machiavelli called *virtù* (in his [Discourses on Livy](#)) – the active participation of citizens in public affairs in the times between elections, to ensure elected representatives act in the interests of citizens and the country they serve, rather than their own. This is a laborious time-consuming process and is "exhausting", as Obama said – but without it there can be no genuine democracy.

For democracy is not simply a set of institutional arrangements such as elections, parliament, a free media and the separation of powers between executive, legislature and judiciary. Those institutions are there to help create and support a democratic culture in which there is transparency, dignity and a recognition of the rights of all citizens.

But the responsibility for creating this democratic culture can't be left to those institutions and elected representatives only. It requires careful cultivation by citizens themselves, who need continually to stay informed, scrutinize new policies, be unafraid to protest, make the effort to go on demonstrations, organise and sign petitions, build solidarities with people they don't know around common issues and hold the government to account.

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My [research](#) on democracy while living with rice paddy farmers in West Bengal taught me that being an active citizen is not unlike the act of cultivation itself. Democracy can't just happen at an election, it needs careful cultivation even after the election is over. A new government can be seen as the start of new crop cycle, with the best plants for the soil having been chosen – but citizens need to work hard every single day (farmers do not take weekends off!) to remain active. This work is often backbreaking, as anyone who has tried to build support for an issue will know and can involve innumerable

conversations aimed at persuading others, drafting letters, travelling to meetings and attempts at bringing people together. And as farmers point out, this kind of hard graft also requires patience, for a garden doesn't grow overnight and merely shouting at plants doesn't make them grow quicker. At every step there is need for vigilance – pests and weeds (division and rivalries) can emerge from nowhere and need to be rooted out immediately.

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Democracy can degenerate easily, governments can make bad decisions and coalitions of activists can be brought down by egos and tensions, so there is rarely room for complacency. But above all, cultivation is about hope. We plant seeds in the hope of strong and healthy plants, not stunted and diseased ones, and so too it is with politics. The hard work of cultivation is a down payment on the promise of a better future, and cynicism about politics and politicians is not productive. Gramsci famously demanded that we work with pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will – i.e. maintain our determination against our sometimes sceptical selves (especially sound advice for academics!). And so the cultivation of a democratic culture requires a cultivation of the self in discipline, dedication and determination, and such a self emerges only through repeated practice, failures and learnings, as great figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King emphasised.

The farmers in India I worked with know this and it is perhaps not a coincidence that the voter turnout in the villages I conducted research was above 80 per cent and higher than the [national figure](#) of 67 per cent. India also witnessed one of the most successful protest movements by farmers, when from 2020-2021 they held a disciplined non-violent encampment for over a year outside the capital New Delhi and forced the national government to take back the laws changing the agricultural market, that had been introduced without consultation. In the national elections held in 2024, the BJP, party of the incumbent government [lost seats](#) in areas dominated by farmers.

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democratic institutions such as elections are animated and effective.

Cultivating democratic culture in between elections, founded in civic engagement and participation, is thus the only way to ensure that our democratic institutions such as elections are animated and effective. Active citizenship in between elections creates political commitment to issues that motivates citizens to utilize the vote during elections to register their political choice, and also, as [research](#) on India shows, as an expression of their citizenship. It is only when such active citizenship exists that democracy can thrive beyond the last election and be ready for a good harvest at the next one.

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