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Election results in the Americas show that democracy is resilient

Recent political developments highlight its self-correcting mechanisms and the power of people as citizens in difficult times



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The results of mid-term elections in the US last month were a big surprise. Most opinion polls and political pundits had predicted a Republican Party wave. Yet, the Democrats obtained a clearer majority in the Senate, while the Republicans just about managed a razor-thin majority in the House of Representatives. For Joe Biden and the Democrats, it is an unexpected victory, despite consumer price inflation running at its highest level in four decades. Indeed, this is the best mid-term election outcome for an incumbent US president and ruling party in two decades. The biggest loser was Donald Trump. Many of his hand-picked candidates for the Senate, House and governorships were defeated. Moreover, of the Republican candidates for Congress, governor or secretary of state who rejected, questioned or declined to confirm the outcome of the 2020 presidential election that ousted Trump (the election deniers), almost two-thirds were defeated, as citizens voted to preserve the sanctity of elections in a political democracy. The Republican Party is now a divided house. Trump's announcement to run for President in 2024 can only divide it further.

In Brazil's presidential election held just a week earlier, Lula de Silva defeated the populist, authoritarian, far-right incumbent Jair Bolsonaro. The surprise was the narrow margin. In Latin America, this was the most recent in a succession of similar election outcomes. In Colombia, Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla turned leftist politician, was elected President in June 2022, defeating his populist-businessman rival Rodolfo Hernandez, described as 'Colombia's Trump'. In Chile, Gabriel Boric, a former student leader who organized a massive protest movement, was elected President in December 2021, defeating the far-right candidate Jose Antonio Kast, making him the youngest head of state at 35. The losers in these elections were all populist-nationalist-authoritarian leaders on the right or far-right.

These election outcomes in a few countries in the Americas might represent the beginnings of a fundamental departure from the recent past which suggested a growing disillusionment with political democracy across the world. Its origins can be traced to the era of markets and globalization, during 1980-2010, that led to prosperity for a few and exclusion for the many, with inequality rising sharply everywhere. This disrupted the smooth sail of globalization, as the world was confronted with mounting economic problems and political challenges.

Economies became global. But politics remained national. The ideological distinction between mainstream political parties, on both the right and the left, was progressively blurred as both converged to the middle in the belief that markets and globalization were forever, leaving citizens with almost no choice.



There was a political backlash in the form of resurgent nationalisms riding on populist or nationalist sentiments. In advanced countries, nationalist-populist political parties, or far-right xenophobic leaders, exploited fears about openness in immigration and trade as a threat to jobs. In developing countries, nationalist-populist political parties or leaders, challenged or ousted incumbent governments, exploiting ethnic divides, religious beliefs or rampant corruption. These leaders, whose political campaigns sought to exploit and mobilize popular discontents, were in fact elected by their people in countries across the Americas, Europe and Asia.

It was not long before the irony of this changed reality surfaced. Such leaders, elected through democratic processes, turned authoritarian and sought to undermine the foundations of political democracies that brought them to power, by changing constitutions, fixing elections, or refusing to accept election results. Democracy was, and is, at risk, not from monarchs or generals, but from leaders chosen by people themselves, who have done little, if anything, for people whose support they mobilized in their quest for office and power.

Of course, democracies can be manipulated or misused. This has happened in the past and will recur in the future. Yet, if political democracy exists, authoritarian leaders and governments are more accountable to their citizens than they would be without it. But, democracies can become choice-less for voters when or where there is

almost no difference between the main contenders for power among political parties. In such situations, which were not uncommon in the recent past, people did elect demagogues disguised as populist leaders, who then subverted democracy. Yet, inevitable flaws and warts cannot be a reason for rejecting democracy or preferring authoritarianism. Democracy is obviously better than the alternatives, not only for the rights and freedoms it provides to citizens, but also for the checks and balances and the self-correcting mechanisms it provides for political systems when things go wrong.

Recent political developments and election outcomes in the Americas seem to suggest that this might be the beginning of the end of that phase when populist-nationalist-authoritarian leaders were elected by their people and ruled the roost. For one, their credibility is dented. For another, their authoritarianism is no longer acceptable to people as citizens of democracies. A week is a long time in politics. Yet, a better world appears possible.

The legacy of such demagogues will persist. The US and Brazil are now sharply divided societies. So are many others which have not yet witnessed change. The future that unfolds will depend upon the healing touch and political sagacity of the elected leaders who replace ousted populist-nationalist-authoritarians.

But recent political developments do highlight the resilience of democracy, its self-correcting mechanisms, and the power of people as citizens, even in difficult times.

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The rejection of leaders in the US, Brazil and elsewhere who won power as populists but were authoritarian as rulers signals a reassertion of democratic values by electorates.

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Google faces a big threat from ChatGPT's answers to queries

OpenAI's chatbot is flawed but also has a distinct competitive edge



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ChatGPT's responses are not fully reliable but its success seems assured

A new chatbot from OpenAI took the internet by storm this week, dashing off poems, screenplays and essay answers that were plastered all over Twitter by the breathless technoratti. Though the underlying technology has been around, this was the first time OpenAI has brought its powerful language-generating system GPT3 to the masses, prompting a race to give it inventive commands. Beyond gimmicky demos, some people found practical uses for ChatGPT, including programmers who are using it to draft code or spot errors. But the system's biggest utility could be a financial disaster for Google by supplying better answers to queries we currently put to the world's most powerful search engine.

Google works by crawling billions of web pages, indexing content, ranking it by relevance, and then spitting out a list of links to click. ChatGPT offers something more tantalizing: a single answer based on its own search and synthesis of data. ChatGPT has been trained on millions of websites to glean not only the skill of holding a human-like conversation, but information itself (stuff posted online before late 2021).

I went through my Google search history of the past month and put 18 of my Google queries into ChatGPT. I then went back and ran the queries through Google once more, to refresh my memory. The result, in my judgement, was that ChatGPT's answer was more useful than Google's in 13 cases. 'Useful' is of course subjective. What do I mean? Answers that were clear and comprehensive. A query on whether condensed or evaporated milk was better for pumpkin pie sparked a detailed (if verbose) answer from ChatGPT that explained how condensed milk would make sweeter pie. Google gave me links to recipes with no clear answer.

That underscores ChatGPT's prime threat to Google. It gives a single instant response that requires no further scanning of websites, a 'frictionless' experience, something of a holy grail for such tools.

Google has its own version of summarized answers to some queries, but they are compilations of top-ranked web pages and typically brief. It also has its own language model, called LaMDA, which is so good that a Google engineer thought it was sentient. So why doesn't Google cough up singular answers, like ChatGPT? Because anything that stops people from scanning search results will hurt Google's transactional business model of getting people to click on ads. Some 81% of Alphabet's \$257.6 billion revenue in 2021 came from advertising, much of that being Google's pay-per-click ads. "It's all designed with the purpose of 'Let's get

you to click on a link,'" says Sridhar Ramaswamy, who oversaw Google's ads and commerce business between 2013 and 2018, and who says that generative search from systems like ChatGPT will disrupt Google's traditional search business "in a massive way." "The goal of Google search is to get you to click on links, ideally ads, and all other text on the page is just filler," said Ramaswamy, co-founder of a subscription-based search engine called Neeva.

ChatGPT doesn't reveal its sources. In fact, there's a good chance its own creators can't tell how it generates its answers. That points to one of its big weaknesses: Sometimes, its answers are plain wrong. Stack Overflow, a site for coders, temporarily banned its users from sharing advice from ChatGPT, pointing to errors.

My own experience bears this out. When I put my 12-year-old daughter's English essay question into the system, it offered a long and eloquent analysis that sounded authoritative. But it was also riddled with mistakes, for instance stating that a literary character's parents had died when they hadn't. What's disturbing about this flaw is that inaccuracies are hard to spot. It often sounds confident and plausible. OpenAI had initially trained it to be more cautious, but that made it decline many questions. By going the other way, the result is something like college students bluffing their way through class with fluent hogwash.

How common are ChatGPT's mistakes? One estimate doing the rounds is a rate of 2% to 5%. It may be more. That will make internet users wary of using ChatGPT for important information. Another strength for Google: it mostly makes money on transactional search queries for products and navigational searches to other sites. So long as ChatGPT doesn't offer such links, it is not encroaching too deeply on Google's turf.

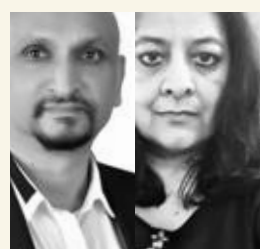
But both could evolve. ChatGPT could get more accurate as OpenAI finesses its training. ChatGPT amassed 1 million users in about five days. That is an extraordinary milestone. It took Instagram 2.5 months to reach that number, and ten months for Facebook. OpenAI isn't publicly speculating about its future applications, but if its new chatbot starts sharing links to other websites, particularly those that sell things and make money, that could spell danger for Google.

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Can 'Kantara' kindle the hope of a rural renaissance?

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Kantara: A Legend, a Kannada movie made with a big heart, conviction and a modest budget of ₹16 crore is a global box office hit. With its revenues said to have topped more than 20 times that figure, it's the toast of Indian cinema this season. The spiritually inclined describe the movie as a magical mirror that throws a kaleidoscope of reflections back at them, each of them deeply personal, with much to ponder. Some say it portrays the greed of rich exploiters and leans towards "Maoism", used here as a blanket term for downtrodden masses standing up for their rights.

But Kantara also mirrors a traditional social, cultural and economic reality of India. In the make-believe world of the film, there is a deeply spiritual and closely bonded community with very few needs and apparent contentment. The land they live on is both provider and protector. Fiction it may be, but our question is: Can a Kantara-like ecosystem sustain itself without diluting or cor-

rupting its core—be it the environment or the lifestyle and culture of those bound by it?

Agriculture is still the largest source of livelihood in India and employs most labour. In 2021-22, India's farm sector growth was at 3.9%, up from 3.6% the previous year. But the sector faces steep challenges. Despite its remarkable resilience during the pandemic, input costs have risen and it sorely lacks investment, infrastructure and processing capacity. So, can the land and its people offer an opportunity for rural micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to thrive?

It's a potential that visitors to rural India cannot miss. Growing connectivity in terms of transport and telecom can enable small businesses to be set up in rural areas. In any case, MSMEs are critical for a developing economy like ours, given the sheer numbers they employ. According to the SME Chamber of India, Indian MSMEs account for 45% of total industrial production and 40% of exports, resulting in a contribution to national output to the tune of about 38%.

India's MSME sector is still recovering from demonetization followed by a sudden GST burden and then covid lockdowns, but we could still hope for a Kantara-inspired rural renaissance. Here's how:

Think global: If a small movie can go global, dreaming up quality solutions for people across the world is something our MSMEs could aim for. The internet is a great enabler. Small infotech service companies have made headway, and as the digital divide closes, those in rural settings can too.

Create self-sustaining local businesses. In the movie, the protagonists don't have much to aspire for, as the local landlord keeps them satiated and subjugated in both 'spirit' and spiritual beliefs, with no interest in investing in the community's betterment. But what if locals are motivated to ideate and set up business models? Think of the Amul model, organic farming or processed food units for greater value addition. Technology can enable small farm-to-fork startups that eliminate middlemen and greedy politicians from the value chain. Multiple local businesses can thrive in a single value chain. These

small businesses could make a difference to local ecosystems by fostering open dialogues that are honest, transparent and community-welfare oriented, while symbolically and visibly reducing people's dependence on land owners and other local overlords.

Ignite rural passion as part of the Startup India mission: Empowering locals can create prosperity by stirring up passion, especially when they are working for something larger than the mundane. Local talent can create new offerings that solve real problems faced by far larger numbers, and we can help them scale up. Many large businesses depend on smaller ones for various out-sourced functions. Start-ups in rural areas could be suppliers too. Done across India, this would amount to a bottom-of-the-pyramid strategy for broad-based economic growth. Imagine if all the energy and passion depicted in Kantara were harnessed for a local self-help businesses.

Enable local communities to be largely independent: Pooled resources could form self-support mechanisms. Collective living and universal housing, for instance, could go a long way. The film depicts a community that is relatively self-sufficient and unaffected by what's going outside their area. This is fiction. Still, local communities that are tightly knit—geographically, economically and culturally—can serve as relatively stable ecosystems that protect the local environment, keep communal tensions down and provide various other benefits of shared living.

Encourage stakeholder capitalism: Tensions between big businesses and local communities, as seen in cases where mining potential has been in conflict with age-old Tribal ways of life, can only be resolved through a model of stakeholder capitalism that moves from maximizing 'shareholder value' to 'shared value'. Businesses that venture into rural India must take win-win approaches that are fair to all. Exploitation of locals in any form could evoke cynicism and end our hopes of a rural renaissance.

Everyone's well-being should be part of India's inclusive growth agenda, without which we will end up with only fairy tales to talk about.

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While Kantara is a fictional film, it also mirrors a traditional social, cultural and economic reality of India that should make us ponder how a rural socio-economic rebirth could be achieved.

Aim for self-sustaining startups enabled by modern connectivity and animated by the passion of maximizing shared rather than shareholder value if such a dream is not to end up as a fairy tale.