Comparison of US and Indian Election System

Click here for US Presidential Election

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How the elections are conducted?

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- The date of the election is fixed that is the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November, since 1845.
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- There is no centralised election management body like the Election Commission in India.
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- The US has two federal bodies — the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and the US Election Assistance Commission (EAC) — but both of them together do not add up to anything as powerful or effective as the EC in India.
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- In fact, they have no control over the election administration.
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- Its role is confined to federal campaign finance regulations. The EAC, also a bipartisan organisation, was created only in 2002 to provide funding to states for upgrading their registration and voting systems besides establishing minimum voter identification standards. Its decisions are, however, not binding.
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- The FEC consists of six members, three each appointed by the two political parties. A decision requires four votes to make it non-partisan.
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- All 50 states, and within these, more than 3,000 counties have different management bodies.
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What do they vote on?

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- It’s not just one election but a bunch of simultaneous elections in the US. In many states, a voter will be choosing not just the US president but 20 different contestants on a single ballot, including the member of the US Senate and the House of Representatives, state senate, governor, state attorney general, supreme court judge, among others.
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- Furthermore, there are as many as 162 ballot initiatives (referenda) in 35 states which include the death penalty, raising minimum wages, legalising marijuana etc.
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How do they vote?

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- The voting systems are diverse — voting at polling stations on poll day, early voting in person, absentee voting by mail. The ballot design varies from state to state.
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- Voting technology varies from direct recording electronic voting machines (like Indian EVMs) to paper ballots (marked by pencil or pen). But scanning is invariably used to facilitate counting. Some states have the VVPAT — Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail.
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- The polling station can be in a variety of buildings including private precincts, shopping malls, churches, community centres, courthouses, fire stations besides schools. The polling staff is drawn from a variety of sources — private, elected and others.
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- The hours of voting are longer — 13 hours — as compared to the minimum eight hours (usually nine) in India
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How is their voter turnout?

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- Voter turnout has been historically low in America when compared to other democracies.
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- The vast majority of Americans who are registered to vote to show up in the

polls, at least in presidential years. In 2012, around **84 %** of registered voters cast a ballot.
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- But the catch is that tens of millions of Americans simply aren't registered to begin with. Sometimes that's because they're ineligible, due to residency requirements or state laws that bar ex-felons from voting. But the main reason is that the onus to register as a voter lies on the voter and it is neither compulsory to register nor to vote.
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- Even more commonly, many people just miss the deadline for registering. The US government doesn't automatically register anyone who's eligible to vote. Instead, people have to remember to register — and the rules vary from place to place.
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- The last date for registration varies from one month prior to the poll to the same day (polling day). Online registration is allowed in 31 states plus DC. Any person turning 18 even on polling day is eligible to register. The registration of voters is very low.
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- While in India over 95 percent of all eligible persons are already registered, in the US it was just above 71 percent in 2012. The voter identification system varies too — from different photo identity proofs to self-authentication without a photo.
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- The turnout in the last presidential election was 61.8 percent (compared to India's 66.8 percent). With low registration, this effectively means that less than 45 percent of eligible Americans voted.
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- Voting demographics show that older people — 65 plus — tend to vote more than 18-24 year-olds by as much as 25 percentage points.
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- In contradiction to India, people with more education and income vote more than the less endowed. Similarly, women vote in larger numbers.
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- Blacks and Hispanics vote less because of lack of interest.
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How effective is their system?

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- **The complexity of the election process** and the multiplicity of authorities

in the U.S is a perfect breeding ground for confusion. E,g In the infamous Florida recount incident of the year 2000, the results were first challenged in the Supreme Court due to the confusing coting system called "butterfly ballot". But it was not pursued to the hilt, as Al Gore who lost to Bush by just a few hundred votes chose not to contest the results.
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- This, however, is perhaps the first time that a candidate — Donald Trump — doubted the legitimacy of the election even before the first vote has been cast. He has also indicated that he may not accept the results if he loses.
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- But it’s noteworthy that the **validity of results** declared by the Election Commission of India has never been doubted — even candidates losing by just one vote have never questioned the results, though election petitions have been filed on grounds of corrupt practices of the opponent. We have at least three cases of one-vote victory and one even of a tie, decided by the draw of lots. But the legitimacy of the election was never doubted. That’s the reason why the transition of power has always been seamless.
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- What has worked well for India is a fully empowered but fiercely independent and neutral election commission. The biggest reason for the success of the Indian system is extreme simplicity. All things considered, Indian elections are regarded as a model for a large part of the world. Hillary Clinton described the Indian election system as the “gold standard”.
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- We were often asked why we use EVMs when even the US does not. But actually, the question should be pointed at them for not using the effective method.
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- Our election system is effective in coverage by setting up the poll in every 2 kms which includes a poll booth for a lone voter in Gujarat’s Gir forest and the world's highest polling booth will be located in Himachal Pradesh, at a height of over 15,000 feet.
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- While India gave equal voting rights to women on Day One in 1950, the US had taken 144 years. And then, while India elected a woman prime minister within 19 years, the US has not had a woman president in 240 years.
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- This along with higher registration, higher turnout and an effective and neutral election management system makes our election process more democratic and in effect the greatest democracy in the world.
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Author - Shankar IAS Academy Bengaluru. Top Civil Service Coaching in Bangalore

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