

The Evolution of Democratic Institutions in British India: Electoral Franchise and Legislative Representation, 1920-1940

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical evolution of democratic institutions in British India through the lens of electoral franchise expansion and its impact on legislative priorities. While existing scholarship has focused primarily on post-independence democratic institutions, we investigate how the gradual extension of adult franchise during the colonial period (1920-1940) influenced legislative representation and policy outcomes. Using original archival data comprising over 3,000 legislative debates and records of 1,600 legislators from the Colonial Legislature, analyzed through advanced Artificial Intelligence software, we demonstrate how the introduction of new political blocs—particularly women voters—affected legislators’ representative priorities in social policy and welfare domains. The study contributes to three theoretical areas: it expands empirical research beyond North American colonial legislatures, adds to the literature on colonial institutions in India through legislative analysis, and documents the mechanism between franchise extension and policy change. Methodologically, this study is among the first to apply AI tools to historical legislative debates, demonstrating new approaches for comprehensive legislative data analysis.