Chapter VI

Major Findings, Trends and Observations

Of all systems of governance, viz., democracy, monarchy, oligarchy and dictatorship, democracy has stood the test of the times. Civilization, democracy and information in a way are intertwined. Liberal democracies sustain on the principle that one person's right is other person's obligation. Information has been reckoned as power and it is assumed that those who control information control the destinies of the nations. This may be an overstatement but history has proved more than once the potential of information channeled through mass media. The use of mass media in Germany as an instrument of social control between the period of two World Wars came to be widely recognized and dreaded upon.

At the same time, the power of information dissemination in the hands of either the governmental or independent sources also suffers from the same inadequacy of deciding what to disseminate and what to hold back. With the proliferation of media, the sum total of information from various sources has increased to manifold. Today an average person is bombarded with information from all directions. Does all this make him vulnerable? Or does it give him the freedom to choose or make him suffer from the inevitable “information overload” hence information immunity?

It is said that the extent of democracy in a society is known by the extent of freedom the media enjoy there. What role do media play in probably the most important democratic function, viz., the election process, has been an issue of much concern and research in the last few decades.

A study of the mass media in election campaigning in three democracies namely the United States of America, Germany and India - countries as varied as the star constellation
provides some interesting insights. The present research was taken up with the following hypotheses:

- There is growing disinterest bordering cynicism among the people in politics and political institutions in liberal democracies;
- the mass media seem to have usurped the traditional role of the political parties in reaching out to the electorate, thus making the latter redundant;
- mass media tend to take on an activist role especially in time of election;
- campaigners and politicians manipulate the media in getting favourable coverage;
- early opinion polls concentrating on the “horse race” aspect of election often led to the “bandwagon” and at times to the “underdog” impact on the election outcome;
- there is an undesirable nexus between politics and industry especially when it comes to financing the elections;
- the voters in the three countries under study think and behave differently due to varying social, economic and literacy levels.

“Attempting to study media impact in settings with very stable prior opinions is a social scientist’s equivalent of attempting to count galaxies through the wrong side of a telescope”, opined L M Bartels in his article “Messages received: The political impact of mass exposure” in the American Political Science Review in 1993. And how true! Nonetheless through a combination of research methodologies involving the survey technique wherever possible, access to primary data, secondary data analyses, case study method and in-depth interviews with a cross section of academics, researchers, strategists, opinion poll experts, policy makers and media practitioners, the present researcher has tried to arrive at certain findings, trends and observations about the possible impact of mass media in election campaigning in the three democracies under study.
Faith in democracy is inherent in the electorate in the USA, Germany and India. The percentage of people using their franchise is the highest in Germany. The turn out on election day in the USA and India is almost similar ranging between 50-56 per cent. This compares very poorly with almost 90 per cent German electorate using their franchise.

In America, there is a general feeling of indifference, if not apathy towards politics. One of the reasons could be that the country by and large consists of people from across the world who have come to the “Land of Opportunities” escaping from regimentation, deprivation, brutalisation of one kind or the other (social, economic, intellectual or political), participation in the political process hence, is not a priority area for a good number of Americans. The cliche is “It is politics as usual”. In Germany, people take it as a matter of their duty to vote. History especially the patch of fascism is too fresh in their minds to take democracy lightly. The younger lot, however need to be initiated in the political process more actively. A number of research studies have suggested that an average German takes pride in casting his vote. In India, despite the allegations of partisan politics, the role of money & muscle power, and criminalisation of politics, the basic faith in democracy has sustained especially among the weaker sections of the society, if the elections during the last fifty years are any indication.

When it comes to what the voters look for in a party or a candidate, the electorate in all the three countries demand transparency and accountability. Personalities and charisma are also the winning factors. In the 1992 Presidential election in the USA, some research studies suggest that people voted more keeping in view the candidates as compared to the 1988 election when a majority of vote went to the parties. Despite serious allegations relating to his character and the Republicans trying to make the most of it, an average American was impressed by the forthrightness of Bill Clinton. To a committed and an indecisive voter, he was an honest person with human follies not serious enough to be held against him. German society, somewhat conservative does not appreciate mud-slinging by politicians against each other. Media rarely touch these aspects. Although, media did at times criticise, both the major parties viz. the
Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democratic party of projecting their candidates more than the party programmes. The media also commented that the parties were going the American way where personalities were more important than the parties. In Germany, the party affiliations are very strong. Despite the hoopla created around candidates, the voters went for the tested party in the second election after unification of the country. The Union coalition won, although only by a whisker. In India, till the late seventies, there had been one party dominance - the Congress since 1952 when the country adopted parliamentary form of governance. The Party and candidates were almost synonymous. There has been a gradual erosion of faith in politicians, if not the political system in this country, despite a vast mass of electorate being illiterate. If some of the opinion researches and media messages are to be believed, a common man in India perceives a politician as a power hungry person who has neither the good of the society nor of the nation at his heart. The various scandals involving politicians of all political parties with some odd exception (who however don’t mind supporting politicians and political parties with tainted reputation) has only reinforced peoples’ disgust with politicians in general.

The concept of committed vote banks in all the three democracies is eroding. As a consumer in the nineties is no more “brand loyal”, he/she looks for the value added product, the discerning voter also looks for the “Report card” of the parties and the candidates. In multi-party democracies like India, there are many other reasons for the split vote. Germany is used to the coalitions for long. The era of coalitions began in India in 1977. Despite the experiment failing miserably, the country has witnessed coalitions in 1989, 1996 and in 1998. The 1989 and 1996 coalition govt's did not last two years each. The current govt with coalition partners from as many as 17 parties is experiencing the twists and turns, among speculations of its life ranging from a day to a full term!

The role of mass media and professional campaigners has been in focus of the researchers and analysts for some time. The “Dirty tricks” department of political parties as earlier referred to have now been replaced with highly educated professionals who specialize in
communication, technology, media planning, strategy formulation and market research. The candidates are packaged and sold in the market place as soaps and detergents, using fierce marketing strategies. There has been a lot of heated discussion about the role and impact of commercial advertising especially negative advertising in election campaigning. In the USA, the Republicans are discredited for starting the trend during the 1988 Presidential election. It worked for their candidate, George Bush. The trend continued in the next election. Many research studies, however suggested that people in general did not appreciate negative advertising. It seemed to put them off. In Germany, especially after the unification one witnessed the use of mass media especially commercial advertising by front runners- Helmut Kohl and Scharping of the CDU and SPD, the chancellor candidates from the respective parties. However, negative advertising against the adversaries is not generally resorted to in Germany. In India, one witnessed fierce advertising battles between the Congress and the BJP from the 1980s. Negative strategy has not been very direct but at times one does come across such underpinning especially in audio and video cassettes brought out by various political parties around the election time.

There is an increasing concern in the liberal democracies about “Americanization” of their election. A lot of glamour and glitz is now being attached to elections which to observers does not seem a healthy trend.

There is a feeling and concern among scholars, researchers, and social scientists that the election outcomes could be different, if not better, if only the media had reported the matters objectively.

Politics as an institution is age-old and it has taken it thousands of years to shape and mould itself, the media especially the mass media are just a hundred odd years old. Thanks to the technology, through their reach and accessibility, the media have created a lot of clout around themselves. At times one gets a feeling that media shape politics. The potential of mass
media in **persuading** and **manipulating** the public into taking decisions which they may not be inclined to. had there been no mass media, is a subject matter of much academic discussion and empirical research. Although there have been no definitive studies to suggest that the voting decisions are based on mass media stimuli alone, one school of thought believes that the individual is protected in two ways from direct “manipulation” by the media. On the one hand, media messages are received indirectly through the opinion leaders and group affiliations, on the other, psychological pre-dispositions select only those messages which the receiver finds “congenial” and matching his or her value system. On the other hand, a number of research scholars feel the media set the agenda during elections. By choosing which issues to highlight and which to ignore, the media, feel the critics, take on a partisan role. The “agenda setting” theory has received a lot of attention by researchers. A number of studies do suggest that the issues in media focus also became election issues.

However, there are any number of researchers and analysts who question the adequacy of mass media. Mass media, according to them are inadequate sources of information. They question their purity and adequacy. To them mass media at best “flashlight” rather than mirror the society. Hence, the audience do not get a complete image of the political scene. The media, hold the analysts have no hearing on public education as is expected in democracies. Walter Lippmann, the legendary journalist and analyst opined that **news and truth were not necessarily the same thing and needed to be clearly distinguished.** In the arena of politics, issues flow from societal problems and values are embedded in the social fabric. In the world of news, however, the issues are less deeply rooted. They flow from candidates, events and information.

Some liberal critics point out that information is selected and presented as news within socially constructed frameworks of meaning. The news, they assert is signified through the “symbolic System” of society. It draws upon assumptions and premises, images and chains of association, that are embedded in cultural tradition. This kind of reasoning has prompted some people to see the output of the media not as reflection of raw, unmediated reality but rather as a
The opinions about media can be divided broadly as of liberal functionlists and radical functionalists. Both the schools of thought have propounded their views based on empirical research and survey techniques.

Whereas the classical radical tradition sees the media as agencies of mystification that “bend reality” and engender false consciousness, the liberal tradition assumes a much greater degree of affinity between media, reality and the public. The media are assumed to reflect rather shape society.

Skepticism about the power of media to ‘determine’ society was powerfully reinforced within the liberal tradition by effects research. From 1930s onwards, liberal researchers demonstrated through experimental research and surveys that media audiences have a mind of their own. How people respond to media stimuli - not merely what they will accept but even, sometimes, what they understand or remember - is powerfully influenced by what they think already. This results in dissimilar groups of people responding to the same communications in different ways. Underlying this “obstinacy”, argue liberal researchers, is the fact that audiences are not empty vessels waiting to be filled by the media. Audience members have prior values, opinions and cognition formed by earlier socialization, membership of social networks and personal experiences. Even in relation to issues reported by the media about which they know absolutely nothing, people still have simplifying maps of meaning, an interpretative ability - which enable them to assimilate information in a selective way.

This minimal effects consensus was challenged within the liberal camp by a new generation of researchers from the early 1970s. They argue that the world has changed in ways that make the media more influential. The rise of television, with its bi-partisan tradition of reporting, has reduced selective avoidance of communications that challenge cherished ideas.
and beliefs. The last three decades have witnessed more people depending on media to know about variety of information. The other key theme of this reappraisal is that the media's influence is contingent on the characteristics of the audience and the wider context of reception. Some studies suggest that certain sorts of people—such as those who are non-partisan, with low interest in politics and who are uncertain can be more influenced by the media than others.

However, the effects research tradition is not without problems. It is generally confined to a short-term measurement of what is generally a long-term process of influence. While attempts have been made to measure the cumulative influence of the media on the basis of longitudinal data, this merely confounds the problem central to effects research of distinguishing between media and non-media influences on audiences. Leaving aside the problems of interpretation, what the new effects research suggest is that, generally, only minorities of people—and often very small groups are influenced by the media in a measurable way in terms of their attitudes and behaviour, after non-media influences have been taken into account. However, the media have greater influence in changing cognition [i.e., perceptions]. They can have a pronounced short-term effect on what issues people think are important. The new wave theory thus revised upwards but did not dislodge the basic conclusions of pioneer audience research about the limited influence of the media.

The logical question that arise of the above arguments is, if mass media have so little effect, why study them? This was the central problem posed by effects research for the liberal tradition. The argument advanced by liberal functionalists was that the media may have small effects on the audience but they have big consequence for society—an argument which has been developed in a particularly interesting way during the last decade.

The historical tradition argues that the mass media have changed society by modifying time and place. The political tradition argues that even if media do not change the minds of most of the voters, they have changed the political process. Modern media have changed the
conduct of elections, selection of political leaders. This is more true of the USA where some studies suggest that the presidential candidates who are media savvy and "who look good on television" stand a better chance of winning.

However, the main way in which the media are said to "matter" in liberal analysis is by facilitating the functioning of society. This was conceived initially in terms of the political system, taking a predictable form. The media it was considered, informed the electorate, acted as a two-way channel of communications and influence between the government and the governed, and provided a check on the abuse of power by the government by focusing issues through disclosure of information in their reportage.

Over a period of time, the sociological functional perspective about the media argued that the media had three important social functions: they enable people to monitor what is happening in ways that disclose threats to the value systems and beliefs of the community; they facilitate the co-ordination of society by providing channels of communication between various social groups, enabling a concerted response; and they assist the transmission of values from one generation to the next.

Using focus groups and survey methods, researchers discovered an enormous variety of media functions [i.e., uses], reflecting differences in the goals, psychological needs of social experiences of individual audience members. These included promoting a sense of belonging, providing companionship, facilitating personal interaction, acquiring insights into the self and others, gaining a feeling of control, escaping from unwanted reality, and providing a sense of relaxation. The implication of research is that the media offer a cafeteria service from which people take what they want.

Uses and gratification research generally focuses on the individual. James Cary in the 1990s argues that much mass communication has a ritual meaning which draws people together.
and affirms the underlying continuity of things. The media in this sense not only promote the “we-feeling” but also foster integration into society’s normative order of moral values, its sense of what is right and what is wrong. Dyan and Katz in their discussion give an example of the televised wedding of Prince Charles and Diana, which was watched by millions of people in Britain and elsewhere. The broadcast event according to these researchers “celebrated the universal experience of love, courtship and betrothal, and virtually affirmed a consensual commitment to the institution of marriage”. Years later, the same media focused on the extra-marital affairs of the couple which culminated in divorce, reflecting yet another facet of relationships and also that when it came to human emotions, the Royalty and the common masses shared the same predicaments. The search for eternal love and her tragic death made Diana an icon. The images were reinforced by the media.

The liberal functionalist approach has been lambasted by radical critics on the grounds that it is rooted in two false premises. The first is the belief that there is an underlying unity of interest in society. Strengthening the bonds of society through the integrative functioning of media is assumed therefore to be in everyone’s interest. However, argue the radical approach, the winners and losers do not have the same investment in the social order. The media’s projection of an idealized social cohesion may serve to conceal fundamental differences of interest. Second, the liberal functionalists approach, argue the proponents of radical theory, is generally based on the false assumption that media are independent and socially neutral agencies in society. This assumption, they argue ignores the close ties that exist between the media, the state and big business.

The analysis of media content in the radical approach focuses on the media’s role in maintaining class domination. The feminist-functionalist tradition which focuses on the media’s support for patriarchy. Some researches prove that media sustain male domination through “the symbolic annihilation” and “trivialisation” of women as sex objects and domestic consumers, and through teaching women to direct their hearts to homes and hearths. There is also a further
strand of radical functionalism which sees class, gender and ethnic domination as merely different aspects of the same system of control sustained by the media. The radical functionalists emphasize the power of the media in terms not of discrete effects but as a central source of information and signification. The media, according to this argument, not only helps us to know more about the world but also to make sense of it.

In short as we have seen, mainstream liberal and radical traditions in media studies offer us two contrasting views of media's relationship to society. One portrays the media as bottom-up agencies of communication and influence, as independent institutions which give people voice to the people and reproduce the collective conversation of society. It emphasizes popular control of the media through the market, stresses the importance of "professional" mediation, and tends to see the media as organizations autonomous from the power structure of society.

The other portrays the media as top-down agencies of control, as institutions which are subordinated to established power and serve its interests. The media are perceived to be subject to influences that are one-directional and mutually reinforcing.

Despite being different, yet both the liberal and radical functionalists, tend to have in common a reluctance to think of media as responding to cross-pressures, influence from both above and below.

The power of pen may lead some to believe that media could make or break political careers. Similarly, journalism is a mission which requires a zeal. However, not many experts would take any of the two arguments. To them both are chosen careers, they are linked together because politicians needed media to reach out to their constituents as media needed information to survive.

When one looks at the sociology of the media in all the three democracies under study.
the major media are owned by big business and corporate houses for whom media ownership is a sound business proposition besides lending them a "voice". In the USA and Germany there is a public service broadcasting, which is in competition with other private channels. While some free political coverage is allowed in Germany on both PBS and other channels, in America the political parties pay for commercial advertising. In India commercial advertising is not allowed in the government controlled television and radio. Despite a code of conduct for political parties and the media, it has been observed that the incumbent party "misuses" the electronic media during elections. All the recognized national political parties are allowed free time of fifteen minutes once each on Doordarshan and All India Radio around the election time. With the availability of a number of channels, both international and Indian since the early nineties, the Indian voter in the last two parliamentary elections had the benefit of viewing the plurality of views and exposure to other election based programmes.

While there is disagreement about what aspect of society the media reflect, there is a broad agreement within the liberal tradition that the media have a high degree of autonomy in advanced liberal democracies, despite their overt control. However, changes in the ownership and structure of the media pose a problem for analysts in this tradition. Ownership of the media has become more concentrated, increasingly on a global and not merely a national scale. In some sectors especially press it has become more monopolistic; and above all, control of commercial media has gone into the hands of big business corporations. The argument that media are independent institutions, ultimately controlled by the society, makes a mockery of the statement when one looks at the media being business propositions for the rich.

One part of the refutation of this argument advanced by liberal academics is that staff with a commitment to professional goals, have achieved a high degree of autonomy within media organizations. This is viewed as a culmination of a historical process in which media staff acquired a stronger sense of their own worth, gained increasing personal decision-making power as a consequence of a growing division of labour and specialization within media organizations.
and developed a commitment to a professional set of values that embodied a public interest culture. The building-up of this professional power has ensured that the media continue the be independent even if most commercial media have come to be owned by big business. Another argument in favour of media by and large being independent is that over the years media controllers have changed. The dispersal of shareholdings in large media conglomerates and the increase in their operation have weakened and diluted “proprietary” control. More power now has passed on to professional managers concerned with market performance rather than pursuit of ideological goals. It is not out of place to mention here that in one of the mainstream newspapers in India, viz., Times of India, the designation of an editor is qualified by a particular area as “market” [i.e., “Dilip Padgaonkar, editor (Delhi market)” and not just Delhi].

The radical argument, however, is that media are not neutral agencies. The school of thought believes that there is an unequal division of power in society, which can result in the media being co-opted to serve the interests of dominant institutions and social groups. According to Elliot, the civic rituals mediated by press and television are often performative rites whose real purpose is to legitimate institutions of authority. Take for example, the wedding of Charles and Diana which at one level, its function was to draw people together in a unifying event that celebrated the “universal” experience of love and marriage, but its more important function, according to radical functionalists was to consolidate the popular association between the monarchy and the family, and in this way renew loyalty to the crown. Its main consequence according to this theory was to reinforce an institution which is symbolic apex of the British class system, to legitimate a highly centralized and, in certain important respects, “undemocratic State, and to sustain a ‘culture of backwardness’ that stands in the way of modernizing British society”.

Both the liberal and radical theories have their points of view and as media consumers and students we need to take cognizance of. At a mundane level, the research study reflected a vast difference in the mass media accessibility and reach in the three countries. The USA can
truly be said to be an “Information Society” with a vast array of mass media and narrowcasting to choose from. In Germany also a lot of plurality of opinions is available. Despite a free and a fair print media in India, the electronic media remained under Government control till the United front government came to power in 1996. The government was short-lived but the AIR and Doordarshan were made autonomous. The BJP coalition however, has got the bill passed in Lok Sabha, which would make the autonomous corporation accountable to a 22 member committee of the parliament. The bill is yet to be tabled in Rajya Sabha, at the time of writing the chapter.

In Germany also there are both the PBS and private radio channels. In India despite 50 years of democracy, we still have only a government controlled radio station. FM radio which was with a private broadcaster till recently is now run by the All India Radio itself, pending renewal of contract and invitation of fresh tenders. The government, however, could not stop the satellite channels. Accessed through cable operators today, an Indian household can access 750 hours of cumulative television programming through both national, private and international channels.

Traditionally, media are perceived as observers, rather neutral observers of the political scene. Events in the last few decades however, have amply demonstrated the inadequacy of this point of view. The mass media have come to acquire an invincible position in the political process. Some media deliberately take on an activist role. Whether it is fair or not is debatable.

Media bias especially in times of election in the three democracies was undeniable as reflected in the analysis of various media messages, research studies and expert comments on the subject. In the USA, the media are believed to have a liberal bias. In Germany they tend to be pro-right. In India the feeling is that while the mainstream media are liberal, the local and vernacular press by and large tend to favour the party in power. India has the distinction of publishing the maximum number of newspapers—more than thirty thousand, the highest in the world.
A good number of people in the three countries gather information about politics, political parties and elections through the mass media. Some analysts feel that the commercial networks misuse society’s most persuasive medium. “Gatekeeping”, a traditional function of the governments now is in the hands of the media houses. Nation’s political agenda once set up by the political leaders was now decided by the media who control which facets of politics will be reported and which ignored. Similarly, candidates in the past needed the backing of the political parties to project themselves but the function now is increasingly performed by the mass media, especially in America. In Germany, the party affiliations are still very strong. India is yet to reach the goal of being a mass media society in a true sense of the term due to inadequate reach and accessibility of mass media to a good number of its citizen.

The views of the experts in fact, oscillate between the belief that the mass media powerfully shape human attitude and their role in the political process to skepticism about their adequacy.

Closely related with the election campaigning is the issue of early opinion polls to gauge public’s perception on various issues, personalities and party programmes. If the media are referred as the fourth estate, some analysts reckon opinion polls as the fifth estate. Do opinion polls have any decisive role in the election outcome? Is there impact on politics a reality or a myth? While no definitive answers are in sight but politics over the years has become a booming business with hundreds of opinion polls held by various organizations, media and interest groups at the time of an election. The findings revealed anxiety and concern on the part of social scientists and others who felt, if not the bandwagon or underdog effect, early opinion polls dissuaded serious people from contesting public offices and also it discouraged people from casting their vote in the belief that the mandate was already announced. Analysts have compared politics with the market place which cannot function without ambition and the politicians were its victims.
Another area of criticism against opinion and exit polls has been that the discipline has gone from the social scientists' domain to the market researchers who probably were not adequately equipped to handle serious matters as the political behaviour of the masses. It is felt that market researchers lack political sensitivity which is needed for a research of this kind. On the other hand the pollsters do not find anything wrong in projecting the trends before an election. Similarly, the media persons also feel that opinion polls are reporters' tools and if handled properly they can lead to serious public debates. However, not much serious work seems to have been done to know the impact of early opinion polls on the psyche of the electorate.

Which segment of the society is vulnerable to early polls and what factors govern the voting behavior of the electorate - caste, colour, creed, religion, family background, political platform of the political parties, personality of the candidate or the media stimuli, issues such as these have been a subject matter of much empirical research. Studies into the voting behavior of the electorate over a period of time in the three countries under study provide interesting insights.

In the USA the voting patterns have been on traditional patterns with an occasional shift. If we were to study the last three elections in the US, the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton won both in the 1992 and 1996 elections without a majority popular vote. He, however, increased his support from many demographic groups which included, women, Blacks, young voters, Jews, Democrats and Liberals. Bush in 1992 and Dole in 1996 did better with the White, Catholics and the rich. Over the years however, a lot of cross currents have been felt. An educated rich Black may vote for the Republicans. Similarly, a young catholic woman who believes in pro-choice may vote for the Democrats. Ethnic voting in the USA especially in areas where large ethnic communities live together have become important as they tend to vote en bloc.
In Germany, the Catholics traditionally vote for the Union parties. SPD's (Social Democratic Party) vote bank lies with the Protestants, non-believers, workers and young voters. White collared salaried officers, senior citizens prefer the Christian Democratic party and the Christian Social Union party. The Alliance’ 90 and the Green party which was founded with the support of the young voters have now increased their base among other age categories also especially in the 25-34 years. When compared with other parties like the FDP (Federal Democratic Party) and the PDS (the Party of the Democratic Socialists), the Alliance’ 90 and the Green parties have been doing well with the workers both in the east and the west parts of Germany.

India provides an interesting kaleidoscope. The Congress party enjoyed the support of all the categories till the seventies, after which there has been a continuous erosion in their vote base. The Muslims traditionally voted for the party but in the elections in the 1980s and the 1990s, a large chunk of the Muslim vote has gone to the Janata and the Samajwadi Janata parties. The Hindu vote has also twisted and turned in the same period. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is the largest gainer. The party along with others lost some vote to the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), especially the vote of the lower caste Hindu. The Sikh vote was divided between the Congress and the Akali parties for long but in the 1997 Punjab Assembly election, the Congress which was in the saddle for five years has been routed. The Akali Dal (Badal) and the BJP have formed the government. In Uttar Pradesh also after months of imbroglio (no party won the absolute vote), the BJP-BSP combine with a majority Hindu vote has formed the Government on 21 March 1997. From the late 1980s, the BJP has been able to attract young voters. A party which was hitherto known as the party of the “shopkeepers” has been able to make inroads into a segment of the educated and the up market voters. In fact, it seems the Indian voter has just begun experimenting with his choice to get the best value for his vote. Voting on caste considerations has been the bane of Indian democracy. When it comes to the issues which bothered the electorate in all the three democracies under
study. ECONOMY, PRICE RISE and UNEMPLOYMENT occupied the center stage in the elections under reference.

The media had their agenda to follow in the elections held in the 1990s. In the USA, the state of the American economy was the central theme in the 1992 election. The other two issues related, one what came to be known as the “Perot phenomenon”, an independent millionaire Ross Perot contesting for presidency, and the other to Bill Clinton’s draft evasion and the allegations relating to his character. The incumbent President George Bush was always at the receiving end for his so called non-performance on the economic front. Hence despite his earlier high ratings of popularity especially after the Gulf war, his popularity went down when the media focus shifted from his achievements to his failure on the economic front. Media also constantly bashed him for not being interested in his own campaign without realising that as the President he had the work of governance also on him and he could not possibly have as much time to devote on his campaign as his adversary Bill Clinton. In the 1996 election, the economic status of the country favoured the incumbent President. However, what hogged the media headlines in this election were the alleged sources of the “Soft Money” and a number of scandals, the White water being one among them. Despite that, the media on the whole was very favourable to Bill Clinton in both the elections.

In the German election, the first after unification in 1990, the media were euphoric in writing about the efforts put in by the Union parties. The SPD came out as a somewhat reluctant partner to the idea of unification. The central theme hence was Unification. In the 1994 election, the state of economy, unemployment, social security were the issues. In the beginning the liberal media wrote positively about the SPD and Rudolf Scharping as the possible Chancellor. In fact, at one time it seemed, the tables could turn in its favour. A few months before the election in October 1994, however, the CDU and the incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl gained popularity. The media focused on the booming economic scenario, Germany’s contribution and role in the European Union and the charisma of Chancellor Kohl.
In Germany, most of the election expenditure is covered by the federal funding. Party affiliations are also very strong in the country. The parties collect huge amounts as membership fee. The role of money power or its sources hence was a non-issue with the media.

In India, the election under reference is the mid term poll held after less than two years of the 1989 Parliamentary election. The media focused on the three Ms namely Mandal (meaning the issue of reservations), Mandir (Referring to the promise of the BJP to make the Ram Mandir) and Masjid (the Babari Masjid in Ayodhaya), besides price rise, safety and unemployment. The BJP, according to some media analysts in a postmortem analysis spoke of, how the party literally hijacked the media in making the people believe that it was going to sweep the polls.

The analysts have also reckoned the 1991 Election as the bloodiest in the history of Indian democracy. Rajiv Gandhi a former prime minister was assassinated while on a campaigning spree on 21 May 1991. There were large scale rigging, booth capturing and cases of intimidation as reported in the media. In this respect, the country compares poorly with the other two countries under study.

The 1996 Election as put by many analyst was sans issue. The media based on early opinion mapping and in opinionated articles predicted a hung parliament and wrote about various combinations and permutations. A lasting contribution of the media around the election time and much after that has been keeping the issue of electoral reforms alive especially the role of money power. The 1998 election seemed all the way a BJP election till the “Sonia factor” entered. The party promised stability and was able to make pre poll alliances with some regional political parties like the AIDMK, Akali Dal and Trinimul Congress. Its favourite agenda of 1991 and 1996 - of Ram rajya and building of Ram temple were receded back for the sake of its alliance partners. The Front partners and the Congress tried to focus on the “non-secular” and
an anti-minority vision of the BJP. The BJP promised of a "National Agenda" after reaching consensus with its alliance partners. As was a foregone conclusion, no party received a simple majority. The media in general placed the perspective before the electorate. Media bias especially of various television programme anchors drawn from the print medium was never so apparent as during the 1998 election.

Are media objective? The media would like us to believe. A number of studies unfortunately prove the contrary. Many reasons are ascribed to this. Journalism works on the cardinal principle that facts are sacrosanct and comment is free. Journalistic values, though supposedly neutral, introduce an element of "random partisanship" into the campaign, which coincidentally works to the advantage of one at the cost of the other. Media messages before they are presented to the audience go through a series of stages which include what items shall be printed or broadcast, in what position they shall appear, how much space or time will be devoted to them and what emphasis each item will have. There are no objective lessons to follow, only conventions. This flexibility make the media partisan.

Elections are special occasions in democracies and media generally feed on them. In the USA, it is generally believed that the election season never ends. As soon as an election is over, strategies are worked for the next hustings. The US is the only country in the world to have the longest campaign period spanning over a year. The media houses spend their own money and resources in covering the elections.

In Germany, elections are considered solemn occasions and not much festivities are seen around. In fact, one of the studies around the 1990 election reflected that election news was not a priority item in the news bulletins under study, even when chancellor candidates were being covered. In Germany, there is a Federal Court ruling that bars the journalists from taking hospitality from political parties or candidates while covering an election.
In India, elections are festive times. The Indian media are generally criticized for their obsession with politics but that is the way things are. Thanks to the Election Commission and the former Chief Election Commissioner, TN Seshan who implemented the code of conduct both in letter and spirit, both the 1996 and 1998 Parliamentary elections were much austere when compared to some of the past elections. Media whole heartedly supported the crusade of the Election Commission. An average Indian journalist however, is used to the hospitality of the corporate houses and political organizations and see nothing wrong in it. The redeeming feature is that recently some media houses have issued guidelines and codes of conduct to their staff members which bar them from taking free junkets, gifts and hospitality from the corporate houses and other organizations.

If we go back to the hypotheses on which the research study was undertaken, we find that people in all the three countries are not diffident about politics, but have inherent faith in democracy. The mass media play an important role in the elections in focussing issues around each election. In the USA, mass media have an all pervasive role, while in Germany mass media do take part by focussing issues, party platforms and personalities but are not overawed by elections. In India, the mass media especially with the proliferation of television channels have made the plurality of views possible for the viewers. The print medium has always been criticised for its obsession with politics. Opinion polls in all the three countries have become a booming business. They are however seen with skepticism for their possible role in band wagon and under dog effects. No serious research however is undertaken in any of the three countries to gauge the impact of opinion polls in the voting behaviour of the electorate.

There is an increasing fear about “Americanisation” of elections in all the liberal democracies. As in the USA, others democracies are also learning to make use of professional campaigners in working out strategies for the parties and candidates. In this respect one finds a commoditification of candidates and issues.
The nexus of politics and industry especially when it comes to financing elections was in focus both in the USA and India. In Germany, much of the funding comes from the public excheques and membership subscription. Although, funding by big business houses and other sources is commented upon but the issue is not a serious one to come in media focus as it was in India and the USA. And despite being in three different countries with varying educational, social and economic standards, the electorate think alike when it comes to the issues that bother them.

Scope for further research in the field:

Public Opinion Research has come of age but it is imperative that it does not end up becoming just an exercise in prognosis before an election. Research in this direction need to be social scientists’ tool. It is also necessary that opinion research that gauges the attitudes of the people is not restricted around the election time but is staggered to avoid the possibility of bias due to the “election environment” which generally persists at times such as these.

It is felt that studies on the impact of mass media in changing the voting behaviour of the electorate due to early opinion polls can be taken up in all the three democracies under study as elsewhere. This may provide certain insights into an increasing disinterest in politics among the people, besides other things. Another area of study especially in India and Germany could be the content analysis of media messages, both in the print and electronic to gauge the objectivity in reporting and inherent biases, if any.

In summary, it can be said that democracy and media are interdependent. There can not be democracy without a free and fair media. Similarly media can expect freedom of speech and expression only in a democracy. Both in fact sustain on each other. A democratic society, however, among others things, expects from the media - to provide platform for politicians and spokespersons from a cross-section of its populace to encourage plurality of views; provide citizens to learn, choose and become involved rather than merely follow the political process and an ability to resist the efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence.
integrity and ability to serve the audience. However experts differ on whether the media should have the function of agenda setting, identifying the key issues of the day or let other societal forces organize public opinion for the media, if they are to be sound.

As democracies sustain on the cardinal principle of providing freedom of speech and expression, the role of media in shaping human attitudes and behaviour will always remain in focus.