



Counting votes

What the US can learn from India

THE world watched as the US went to the polls. Naturally, every part of the process was highlighted, including certain peculiarities of the US electoral system. As super-storm Sandy caused widespread disruptions on the east coast of the continent just a few days before the elections, local administrations swung into action in such areas to provide many voting stations and overall managed to make the best of a bad situation. However, surprisingly, many voters in other parts of the country had to wait for an inordinately long time to cast their votes. Then there also were concerns with "misbehaving" voting machines that gave rise to some apprehensions regarding their functioning as well as fairness.

Though electronic voting machines (EVMs) were introduced in India in the by-election to Parur Assembly constituency of Kerala in 1982, they have become a standard feature of Indian elections after being used in the general elections to the legislative assemblies of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi in November 1998. Various friendly nations have, from time to time, requested the Election Commission of India for EVMs since these have high credibility, and are rugged — designed to be used independently of any power supply. Each Indian EVM is a self-contained unit and the lack of Internet connectivity rules out any chance of hacking.

On the other hand, US voters in many states used punch cards that are read by a computer even after the infamous recount in Florida in the 2000 presidential election. The Help American Vote Act of 2002 has helped bring in reforms, but the lack of homogeneity in voting machines in the US has cast a shadow of doubt on the fairness of the whole process. American EVMs are made by private firms, whereas in India they are supplied by two PSUs. We must remember that trust plays a very crucial role in any voting scenario. People repose such trust far more easily in governments than in private entities, and at the end of the day it is the business of government to facilitate the process of electing representatives who will constitute it in the future. Perhaps there is a lesson that the largest democracy in the world can teach to the most powerful democracy on the planet.