Green Elections in India

Source: TH

Why in News?

Recently, the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** voiced its concern over the environmental risks associated with the use of **non-biodegradable materials** in elections.

- It has been urging parties and candidates to avoid the use of plastic/polythene for preparation of election material during an election campaign, since 1999.

Why is There a Need for a Shift Toward Green Elections?

- **Environmental Footprint of Traditional Elections:** Traditional election processes have significant environmental consequences due to various factors:
  - **Campaign Flights:** The emissions from campaign flights during elections contribute significantly to the overall carbon footprint.
    - **For example:** In the 2016 US presidential elections, the emissions from just one candidate's campaign flights were equivalent to the annual **carbon footprint** of 500 Americans.
  - **Deforestation and Other Issues** : Reliance on paper-based materials for ballots, campaign literature, and administrative documents leads to deforestation and energy-intensive production processes.
  - **Energy-Saving:** Large-scale election rallies with loudspeakers, lighting, and other energy-consuming equipment contribute to energy consumption and emissions.
  - **Waste Generation:** PVC flex banners, hoardings, and disposable items used during campaigns add to waste generation and environmental impact.

What is Carbon Footprint?

- As per the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, a carbon footprint quantifies the influence of human activities on **carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions** generated from burning **fossil fuels**, typically measured in **metric tons of CO_2 emissions.**
- It is gauged in terms of annual **CO_2 emissions,** a metric that may include additional greenhouse gasses such as methane, nitrous oxide, and other **CO_2-equivalent gasses.**
- It can be a broad measure or be applied to the actions of an individual, a family, an event, an organization, or even an entire nation.

What is the Concept of Green Elections?

- **Green Elections:** Green elections are practices that aim to reduce the environmental impact of electoral processes. They involve measures such as using recycled materials, promoting electronic voting, and encouraging candidates to adopt sustainable campaign practices.
- Green elections aim to minimize the environmental impact of electoral processes through:
    - **Eco-Friendly Campaign Materials:** Candidates and parties can adopt sustainable alternatives such as recycled paper, biodegradable banners, and reusable materials.
    - **Reducing Energy Consumption:** Opting for energy-efficient lighting, sound systems, and transportation during rallies can help reduce the carbon footprint.
    - **Promoting Digital Campaigns:** Leveraging digital platforms for campaigning (websites, social media, and email) reduces paper usage and energy consumption.

What are Successful Examples of Eco-friendly Electoral initiatives?

- **Example from India:**
    - **Kerala's Green Campaign:**
        - During the **2019** general election, the **Kerala State Election Commission** took a proactive step by urging political parties to avoid **single-use plastic materials** during their campaigns.
            - **Single-use plastic** is a disposable material that can be used only once before it is either thrown away or recycled, like plastic bags, water bottles, soda bottles, straws, plastic plates, cups, most food packaging and coffee stirrers are sources of single use plastic.
        - Subsequently, the **Kerala High Court** imposed a ban on **flex and non-biodegradable materials** in electioneering.
        - As an alternative, wall graffiti and paper posters emerged, promoting a more sustainable approach. Additionally, government bodies collaborated with the district administration in Thiruvananthapuram to ensure a green election, emphasizing eco-friendly practices. Training sessions were also conducted in villages for election workers to raise awareness and promote environmentally conscious behavior.
    - **Goa's Artisan-Crafted Eco-Friendly Booths**
        - In 2022, the **Goa State Biodiversity Board** took a significant step by introducing eco-friendly election booths for the Assembly elections.
        - These booths were constructed using **biodegradable materials** meticulously crafted by local traditional artisans from Sattari and Ponda.
            - Not only are these materials environmentally friendly, but they also support local artisans.
    - **Sri Lanka's Carbon-Sensitive Campaign**
        - In 2019, Sri Lanka's Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party launched the world's first carbon-sensitive environmentally friendly election campaign.
        - They meticulously measured carbon emissions from campaign activities, including vehicles and electricity usage.
        - To offset these emissions, they engaged the public in tree planting initiatives across each district.
        - This innovative approach not only reduced the campaign's carbon footprint but also raised awareness about the importance of forest cover.
- **Overseas Example:**
    - **Estonia's Digital Voting Revolution**
        - Estonia laid the foundations for digital voting as an alternative to traditional paper-based methods.
        - Their approach encouraged voter participation while significantly reducing the environmental impact.
        - By implementing robust security measures, Estonia demonstrated that digital voting can be both eco-friendly and electorate-friendly. The success of this approach suggests that other democracies can follow suit.
- These examples demonstrate that prioritizing environmental considerations in electoral processes can set an example for other nations and contribute to a more sustainable future.

What are the Challenges in Adoption of Green Elections?

- **Access to New Technologies and Training for Officials**: Ensuring that all voters have fair access to new technologies is crucial. However, this requires substantial efforts in terms of training election officials and educating voters about the new systems. Some specific challenges include:
    - **Training and Familiarization:** Election officials need to be proficient in operating and troubleshooting the new technology. Adequate training programs are essential to bridge the knowledge gap.
    - **Equitable Access:** Ensuring that all voters, including those in remote or underserved areas, can access and use the technology is a challenge. Addressing disparities in internet connectivity and digital literacy is vital.
- **Financial Constraints and Upfront Costs**: Implementing eco-friendly materials and advanced technology often comes with significant upfront costs. Governments, especially those with limited budgets, may hesitate due to financial constraints.
    - **Budget Allocation:** Allocating funds for technology upgrades while balancing other essential services is a delicate task. Prioritizing modernization within budget limitations is challenging.
    - **Long-Term Savings:** Although initial costs may be high, emphasizing the long-term benefits (such as reduced paper usage and streamlined processes) can help justify the investment.
- **Cultural Inertia and Voter Behavior:** Traditionally, voting has been associated with physical presence at polling booths. Overcoming cultural inertia and changing voter behavior is essential for successful modernization:
    - **Perceived Importance of Physical Voting:** Many voters view physically going to the polls as a sacred civic duty. Convincing them that digital alternatives are equally valid can be challenging.
    - **Trust in New Systems:** Building trust in electronic voting systems is critical. Public skepticism about security, privacy, and potential manipulation must be addressed through transparency and robust safeguards.
- **Security Concerns and Compromises:** Introducing new approaches, such as online voting or blockchain-based systems, raises concerns about vote security:
    - **Cybersecurity Risks:** Ensuring that voting systems are secure from cyber threats is paramount. Any compromise could undermine public trust and the integrity of elections.
    - **Balancing Security and Accessibility:** Striking the right balance between robust security measures and user-friendly interfaces is a challenge. Rigorous security protocols should not hinder ease of use.

Way Forward:

- This **green transition** must involve all stakeholders such as **political parties, Election Commissions, governments, voters,** the media and civil society.
- The success of integrating top-level directives with grassroots initiatives to foster a **green transition** is imperative.
- Political parties must take the lead. The journey can begin by enacting legislation mandating **eco-friendly electoral practices,** with the ECI incorporating them in the **Model Code of Conduct.**
- This involves campaigning through digital platforms or door-to-door campaigning (reducing energy-intensive public rallies) and encouraging the use of public transportation for election work.
- Incentivising the replacement of **plastic and paper-based materials** with sustainable local alternatives for polling booths, such as **natural fabrics, recycled paper** and **compostable plastics**, will aid waste management and support local artisans.
- The ECI can push for **digital voting** even though this necessitates the training and capacity building of officials.
- To ensure equal participation of all voters in the digital electoral process, the government must educate and support voters and ensure equitable access to digital technology.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q1. Consider the following statements: (2020)

1. According to the Constitution of India a person who is eligible to vote can be made a minister in a State for six months even if he/she is not a member of the Legislature of that State.
2. According to the Representation of People Act, 1951, a person convicted of a criminal offense and sentenced to imprisonment for five years is permanently disqualified from contesting an election even after his release from prison.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only
(b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2
(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (d)

Q2. Consider the following statements: (2017)

1. The Election Commission of India is a five-member body.
2. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs decides the election schedule for the conduct of both general elections and bye-elections.
3. Election Commission resolves the disputes relating to splits/mergers of recognised political parties.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 only
(c) 2 and 3 only
(d) 3 only

Answer: (d)

Mains

Q.1 'Simultaneous election to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies will limit the amount of time and money spent in electioneering but it will reduce the government's accountability to the people' Discuss. **(2017)**

PDF Refernece URL: https://www.drishtiias.com/printpdf/green-elections-in-india