



Navigating Expression and Accountability in Student Campaigns

The recent decision by the **Delhi High Court** to **halt** the **counting of votes** in the **Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU) elections** until the defacement of public property is addressed brings to the forefront an important constitutional debate – the tension between **freedom of expression**, a core **pillar of democratic engagement**, and the **protection of public property**, which represents the **civic responsibility** every citizen holds.

In a constitutional democracy like India, the **right to participate** in free and fair elections is fundamental, especially within educational institutions that **nurture the future leaders**. The issue in question reflects on the **ethical conduct of future leaders**, especially in the context of public property, the rule of law, and civic responsibility.

What are the Ethical Justifications for Students' Freedom of Expression?

- **Freedom of Expression:**
 - **Art as Protest:** Graffiti, posters, and pamphlets are traditional tools of protest and expression. In a university setting, such acts are a part of students' right to voice dissent and raise awareness on issues.
 - **Democratic Engagement:** Campaign materials like posters and graffiti facilitate student participation and represent democratic engagement, allowing candidates to communicate their ideas to the broader student body.
 - **Historical Context:** Student movements globally, including in India, have often used public spaces for expression. Examples such as the **Pinjra Tod movement** in Delhi, a student-led campaign aimed at dismantling restrictive and sexist regulations imposed on women, and student-driven graffiti in Kolkata highlight the cultural significance of these expressions in shaping democratic dialogue.
- **Civic Participation:**
 - **Empowering Students:** Engaging in political campaigns and displaying messages in public spaces helps students feel empowered and connected to the democratic process.
 - **Representation:** Banning these activities could reduce students' ability to make their voices heard, potentially weakening the democratic nature of elections.
- **Art as an Expression of Resistance:**
 - Graffiti and posters are considered revolutionary art forms, with a long history of raising awareness and resistance.
 - They are a means of expressing collective frustration, opinion-sharing, and social critique, which are vital to a vibrant democratic society.

What are the Ethical Considerations for Protecting Civic Responsibility?

- **Protection of Public Property:**
 - **Stewardship and Accountability:** Those in leadership or aspiring to leadership roles must act as custodians of public resources. Using public property for campaign purposes shows disregard for communal assets.
 - **Rule of Law:** Allowing public defacement to go unchecked undermines the rule of law, sending the wrong message about respect for shared spaces and public resources.

▪ **Balancing Rights and Responsibilities:**

- **Social vs. Individual Rights:** While students have the right to express themselves, this must be balanced against the rights of the broader public rights to enjoy clean, undamaged spaces.
 - **Unregulated expression** can infringe on the rights of others who are also part of the community.
- **Responsibility of Educational Institutions:** Universities have a duty to instill ethical values. A failure to act on unethical behavior undermines the institution's role as a moral guide.
 - This aligns with the principle of accountability and ensures that expression does not come at the cost of civic order.

▪ **Deterring Unethical Campaigning:**

- **Cost of Excessive Campaign Spending:** The High Court's decision **discourages excessive and wasteful** spending on campaigning.
 - This **promotes fairness** by sending a strong message that campaigns should focus on substance rather than visuals.
- **Undue Influence:** If unchecked, excessive spending and public defacement can result in **undue influence**, where wealthier candidates may dominate, unfairly limiting equal representation.

What are the Philosophical Perspectives on Civic Responsibility and Free Expression?

▪ **Freedom of Expression vs. Civic Responsibility:**

- **Liberalism:** The liberal philosophy emphasises the **importance of individual freedoms**, including the freedom of speech and expression, which should not be restricted unnecessarily.
 - Students are seen as active participants in democratic life, and their right to protest and express themselves should be upheld.
- **Civic Republicanism:** This philosophy stresses the importance of balancing individual rights with civic duties.
 - Citizens, including students, have a responsibility to respect communal spaces and laws, ensuring that public property is preserved for the collective good.

▪ **Consequentialism (Outcome-based Ethics):**

- **For Students' Expression:** Consequentialists may argue that the broader impact of allowing graffiti and posters, enhanced democratic participation and engagement justifies the temporary defacement of public property.
- **For Property Protection:** Conversely, they may also argue that the negative consequences of defacement (costs, disorder, degradation of public space) **outweigh the benefits, making the Court's decision to halt vote counting a valid one.**

▪ **Deontological Ethics (Duty-based Ethics):**

- **Duty to Preserve Public Order:** From a deontological perspective, the duty to maintain the public property and uphold laws is paramount, regardless of the student's motivations. Civic duty should not be compromised in the name of expression.

What Strategies Can Balance Civic Responsibility with Freedom of Expression on Campus?

▪ **Alternative Campaign Methods:**

- **Digital Campaigns:** Encourage students to **campaign through digital platforms**, reducing the need for physical posters and graffiti while still allowing them to reach their audience effectively.
- **Designated Spaces:** Universities can provide **specific areas for students** to display posters and graffiti, balancing the need for public expression with the protection of public property.

▪ **Educational Programs on Civic Responsibility:**

- **Student Awareness:** Universities should introduce **campaigns or workshops to educate students** about civic responsibility, including the ethical implications of defacing

public property.

- **Collaborative Cleanup:** Encourage student candidates to **collaborate in cleaning up public spaces** post-campaign, fostering a culture of responsibility.

- **Stricter Enforcement with Flexibility:**

- **Regulations with Reasonable Limits:** Enforce existing laws around public defacement while ensuring students can still express their views in a responsible manner. Penalties can be scaled based on the extent of defacement.
- **Restorative Measures:** Rather than fines alone, candidates could be **required to contribute to community service** or cleanup efforts, blending enforcement with education.

- **Dialogue between Stakeholders:**

- **Collaborative Solutions:** Engage students, university officials, civic bodies, and the judiciary in a **dialogue to create solutions** that respect both the need for expression and the protection of public spaces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, **student politics plays a pivotal role** in shaping democratic processes by fostering critical thinking, leadership, and civic responsibility among young people. Engaging in political activities allows students to voice their opinions, challenge the status quo, and **contribute meaningfully** to societal progress. **Student activism** is a crucial platform for **nurturing future leaders** and creating social awareness, which in turn strengthens the democratic fabric of society. It equips students with the **skills and knowledge** to participate actively in **governance**, ensuring that the values of democracy are upheld within educational institutions and beyond.

As **Nelson Mandela** aptly said, "**The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow.**" This highlights the **transformative power of student activism**, which not only shapes individual growth but also reinforces the democratic ideals that guide our society.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. In the context of student politics, critically analyse the ethical tension between freedom of expression and the protection of public property. How can a balance be achieved between these two competing interests? (15 marks)

Q. Examine the ethical considerations surrounding the use of public spaces for political expression by students. Discuss the role of civic responsibility in ensuring a democratic and respectful use of such spaces. (15 marks)