KEEP IT SIMPLE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON AADHAAR-VOTER ID LINKING

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

One of the clear successes of Indian democracy has been the regular conduct of elections and the relatively high participation of electors in the voting process compared to other countries. Besides the fact that the process is relatively simple with the use of the electronic voting machine, high voter turnout has also been possible due to registration drives by the Election Commission of India (ECI). Periodically, the ECI does face the issue of a cleaning up of electoral rolls due to increases in migrant populations in urban sprawls, demographic changes due to the entry of more eligible voters, besides deaths of older people. But repeated cycles of elections have allowed for a cohesion in this process with voters allowed to register based on proofs of their age and current place of residence. With the increase in the school-educated population, and most Indian citizens living in houses whose addresses are to be mentioned in several identity documents, registering to vote is a relatively easy process. This begs the question as to why election authorities are coercing citizens to mandatorily link registration in voter rolls with their Aadhaar number, as recent reports have indicated. In December 2021, the Lok Sabha passed the Election Laws (Amendment) Bill seeking to link the voter identity card with the Aadhaar number in order to avoid errors such as voter duplication on the electoral roll. But the Government and later, ECI authorities, have insisted that this process would be voluntary.

The Aadhaar number is not a proof of citizenship and is meant to be issued to residents, while only adult citizens who are resident in India are eligible to vote. Instrumentally speaking, matching the Aadhaar number to the electoral roll in order to perform verifications is not a foolproof process. The Internet Freedom Foundation has cited data to show that self-reported errors in the Aadhaar database are higher than those in the electoral database. There is also evidence that Aadhaar-linkage with voter identity cards, as in the Assembly elections in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh recently, for example, led to the arbitrary deletion of eligible voters on a large scale. Besides, with the Aadhaar number now being used to access a variety of services, linking to voter IDs, when aggregated from booth level data, can possibly lead to misuse by agencies that can access them to profile voters based on harvested information. The absence of a data protection law heightens the risk of this possibility as well. Scholars studying elections in various countries have averred that simplicity of design and effectiveness of constitutional institutions such as the ECI have gone a long way in easing voting and setting India apart as an electoral democracy. The insistence on linking Aadhaar with the voter ID militates against these principles. The ECI should limit itself to utilising existing proofs for voter authentication and Aadhaar declaration should remain voluntary.

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