

DON'T LURE, BUT PERSUADE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON IMPARTING FISCAL RATIONALE FOR POLL PROMISES

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

The [Election Commission of India's proposal](#) to require political parties to disclose the financial implications of the promises they make in their manifestos will add meaning and depth to electoral campaigns. The idea that parties should communicate to electors the fiscal rationale for promising delivery of goods or services that would involve a significant outgo from the exchequer is already part of the Model Code of Conduct from 2015. The ECI is now proposing a proforma for such disclosures. If parties agree and the idea is included in the Model Code, they will have to spell out the section of society that a particular promise is targeted at, the extent of coverage and the number of likely beneficiaries, and the cost of implementing it. They must also spell out how the required resources will be raised. To give the parties an idea of the fiscal challenge that their promised schemes may pose, the Centre and the States have been asked to disclose details of the budget revenue receipts and expenditure as well as the outstanding liabilities. The information, it is believed, will provide a framework under which a manifesto can be assessed by the voter from the perspective of its financial viability. It may also make parties treat manifesto preparation as a responsible exercise meant to persuade rather than lure the voter.

There is bound to be some resentment among sections of the political class. It may be argued that the ECI should not get into the nitty-gritty of manifesto formulation, especially the manner of its implementation, as that will be the political and administrative responsibility of the party that comes to power on the basis of its promises. The guideline itself arose from a Supreme Court judgment in 2013, upholding the right of parties to make electoral promises even if they involved distribution of consumer goods. It was held that such a promise [would not amount to a corrupt practice](#), and as long as these were financed by budgetary allocations cleared by the legislature, they could not be invalidated. The Court also suggested that to prevent extravagant promises from upsetting the electoral level playing field, the ECI could lay down some guidelines. In practice, however, the ECI's guidelines did not elicit enough information, as parties made only routine and ambiguous disclosures. If implemented, detailed financial disclosures may help in informed voter choice, as rival parties are likely to subject manifesto promises to intense scrutiny. It may also have a more meaningful impact, be it positive or negative, on the prospect of a party winning over the electorate with a single flagship promise.

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