The Scope of Approval Voting in India

This editorial is based on **Many of the Above** which was published in The Indian Express on 18/07/2023. It talks about the approval voting system and challenges associated with the approval voting.

India is a **diverse and multi-party democracy**, with more than **600 parties contesting the general elections** and nearly **three dozen parties having at least one member** in **Parliament.**

The **first-past-the-post** (FPTP) method is incongruous with India's unique political diversity, as it rewards the **splitting of votes among numerous parties** and creates incentives for opportunistic and unnatural alliances among parties.

Approval voting, on the other hand, **can reduce voter fragmentation and encourage ideological politics,** as it allows voters to express their support for multiple parties without fear of wasting their vote or helping their least preferred option. It can also prevent post-election defections and horse-trading (political vote trading), as it **reduces the need for pre-poll alliances and seat-sharing arrangements among parties.**

What is the First Past the Post System?

- **About:**
    - An electoral system in which voters cast a **vote for a single candidate**, and the candidate with the **most votes wins the election.**
        - Also known as the **simple majority system or plurality system.**
    - One of the **simplest and oldest electoral systems**, used in countries such as the UK, the US, Canada, and India.
- **Features of the First Past the Post System:**
    - Voters are **presented with a list of candidates nominated by different political parties** or running as independents.
    - Voters choose one candidate by **marking their ballot paper or electronic voting machine.**
    - The candidate **who receives the most votes in a constituency is declared the winner.**
    - The winner **does not need to get a majority** (more than 50%) of the votes, but only a plurality (the largest number) of the votes.
- **Alternative Electoral Systems:**
    - **Proportional Representation (PR) Systems:**
        - These are systems that **allocate seats to political parties or candidates**

according to their share** of the popular vote.
  - **Ranked Voting Systems:**
    - These are systems that **allow voters to rank candidates in order of preference,** rather than choosing one candidate.
  - **Score Voting Systems**:
    - These are systems that **allow voters to score candidates on a numerical scale**, rather than choosing one candidate or ranking them.

What is Approval Voting?

- Approval voting is a voting method that **allows voters to choose as many candidates** or parties as they want from a list of options.
  - The winner is the **candidate or party that receives the most approvals** or tick marks from the voters.
- Approval voting is **different from the FPTP method, which forces voters to choose only one option** and gives the victory to the option with the most votes, even if it does not have a majority.
- Approval voting is also **different from ranked-choice voting**, which requires voters to rank their preferences of candidates or parties and eliminates the **least preferred options until one option has a majority.**
- Approval voting is a **well-researched voting methodology** that is used in elections with **multiple credible choices,** such as in the **United Nations**, internal party **primaries in the US, and sometimes in the election of the Pope**.

How does MOTA Offers a Way to Implement Approval Voting?

- Approval voting can be **implemented in India by adding a new option** on the ballot paper called **MOTA (Many Of The Above)**, which is the **mirror image of** NOTA (None of the Above) that we already have on every ballot.
- MOTA would **allow voters to choose as many candidates or parties as they want from a list of options,** instead of forcing them to choose only one.
- MOTA would **not require any major changes in the existing electoral system** or machinery, as it would only involve adding a new option on the ballot paper and counting the number of approvals for each option.
- MOTA would also **not violate any constitutional or legal provisions**, as it would not affect the right to vote or the representation of people in Parliament.

What are the Benefits of Approval Voting for India?

- **Increase in Voter Turnout:**
  - It can increase voter turnout and participation, as voters would have **more choices and freedom to express their preferences.**
- **Reduce Polarization:**
  - It can reduce polarization and extremism, as voters would be **encouraged to consider more moderate** and inclusive options rather than choosing between extremes.
- **Wider Representation:**
  - It can enhance representation and accountability, as candidates and parties would have to appeal to a broader and **more diverse electorate** rather than catering to narrow interests or loyal bases.
- **Ensure Stability:**
  - It can foster stability and governance, as it **would reduce the dependence on coalitions** and alliances that are often unstable and prone to corruption or blackmail.

What are the Challenges of Approval Voting for India?

- **Lack of Familiarity and Understanding:**
  - Approval voting is a relatively new concept in Indian politics, and many voters may be unfamiliar with the methodology.
  - Building **awareness and educating voters about how approval voting works and its advantages would be essential** to gain acceptance and ensure effective implementation.
- **Resistance from Established Parties:**
  - Approval voting may **face resistance from established political parties,** particularly those who benefit from the existing FPTP system or have a stronghold in certain regions.
  - Parties may be **reluctant to embrace a system** that could challenge their dominance or disrupt existing electoral dynamics.
- **Potential for Fragmented Results:**
  - While approval voting aims to reduce fragmentation, **there is a possibility that the outcome may still lead to fragmented** results, particularly if a significant number of candidates receive high approval ratings.
    - This may result in the need for **post-election coalition-building** or further rounds of voting to determine a clear winner.
- **Constitutional and Legal Considerations:**
  - Implementing approval voting may require constitutional or legal amendments to existing election laws.
  - Overcoming **legal hurdles and ensuring compliance** with constitutional provisions may pose challenges that need to be carefully addressed.

What Steps can be Taken for Introduction and Effective Implementation Approval Voting?

- **Promote Awareness and Education:**
  - Conduct public awareness campaigns to **educate voters about the concept and benefits of approval voting.**
  - Collaboration among civil society organizations, educational institutions, and media outlets to disseminate information on the advantages of approval voting in reducing voter fragmentation.
- **Pilot Programs and Case Studies:**
  - Implement pilot programs in select constituencies or regions **to test the feasibility and effectiveness** of approval voting in the Indian context.
  - Conduct case studies and gather empirical **data on the outcomes of approval voting**, highlighting its potential to minimize vote splitting and encourage voter participation.
- **Engage with Political Parties:**
  - Encourage political parties to **open dialogues and discussions** on the adoption of approval voting as an **alternative electoral method.**
  - Highlight the advantages of approval voting in fostering ideological politics and **reducing the reliance on opportunistic alliances.**
- **International Collaboration and Expert Consultation:**
  - **Seek collaboration** with international organizations and **electoral experts who have experience with approval voting** or similar alternative voting methods.
  - Organize **consultations and workshops with experts** to gather insights, learn from best practices, and adapt approval voting methodologies to suit the unique characteristics of Indian elections.
- **Public Discourse and Debates:**
  - Encourage public debates and discussions on the **need for electoral reforms** and the potential benefits of approval voting.
  - Facilitate **platforms for experts, academics, politicians, and citizens to express their views** and opinions on the subject, fostering a wider understanding and acceptance of approval voting.

Drishti Mains Question:

Evaluate the merits and demerits of approval voting in the context of India's political diversity and democracy.

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