Paper Ballots in Members of Legislative Council (MLC) Polls

Mains: *GS-II – Polity*

Why in news?

Elections were recently conducted for seats in the State Legislative Councils across several states with the strict use of physical paper ballots.

What is a Ballot Paper?

- A ballot paper is ***an official document*** which voters use to cast their votes by indicating their preferences on it.
- The procedure of holding legally binding elections means that ballot papers also need to fulfil certain criteria.
- For instance, all voters have to receive identical ballot papers (print, size, colour etc.).
- Furthermore, the boxes in which candidates' names are written need to be the same font and size, thereby giving each candidate equal representation on the ballot paper.
- The common type of ballot papers are paper ballots, but ballots can also be created online and used digitally or filled out by using a voting machine.

What is the difference in Voting systems?

- **First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) System (Used in General Elections) -** A voter chooses **one single candidate**.
- The candidate with the highest number of votes wins, even if they don't cross 50% of the total votes.
- Standard EVMs are designed to record a single press of a button per voter.
- **Proportional Representation by Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) System (Used in MLC & Rajya Sabha Polls) -** A voter does not press a button for just one person.
- Instead, they **rank candidates in order of preference** (1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, etc.) on the ballot.
- Current M3-model EVMs can only record a single definitive vote.
- They cannot capture, sequence, or transfer multiple ranked choices (1, 2, 3) needed for STV counting rules.

Which other elections are held using paper ballots?

- Rajya Sabha elections work on the same principle (ranked preferences, paper ballots), which is why there also EVMs are not used.
- In fact, voters in these RS polls are often given a specific pen to mark their ballots, and ballots marked with any other pen can be declared invalid.
- Paper ballots are also used for presidential polls.
- Most elections to Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads are also held through ballot papers.

- Only the three States/UTs of Kerala, Sikkim, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu conduct gram panchayat elections through ÉVMs.
- Some other States are in a transitional phase.

What are the electoral rules on MLC polls providing for ballot paper voting?

- The Representation of the People Act and the Conduct of Elections Rules both provide for ballot-paper voting in the MLC polls.
- Switching to EVMs would need new technology approved by the Election Commission as well as changes in the law.
- Article 171(4) states that these elections shall be held “in accordance with the system of proportional representation by means of the single transferable vote.”
- Article 80(4) provides the same system for Rajya Sabha elections by MLAs, and Articles 54 and 55 use it for the President’s election.

What are the advantages of paper ballots in preferential voting?

- **Captures Multi-Preference Data -** Voters can rank as many candidates as they wish, providing clear backup choices.
- **Transparent Multi-Round Counting -** Physical ballots allow candidate agents to inspect ballot piles during complex transfer rounds.
- **Accommodates Complex Quotas-** Allows manual auditing of surplus distributions step-by-step.

What are the key challenges with paper ballots in MLC polls?

- **High Rate of Rejected Votes-** Voters often write numbers incorrectly (e.g., writing "First" instead of numerical "1", or assigning the number "1" to two candidates), leading to invalidated votes.
- **Prolonged Counting Process -** Sorting ballots by hand through multiple elimination rounds can take many hours or even days.
- **Lack of Party Symbols-** MLC ballots for special constituencies (Graduates & Teachers) often omit official party logos, requiring clear handwritten numbering from voters.

What is the way forward?

- **Development of STV-Compliant EVMs-** The Election Commission of India (ECI) can collaborate with engineers to design multi-preference digital voting technology.
- **Voter Awareness Campaigns-** Broaden voter training programs for Graduates' and Teachers' constituencies to reduce invalid preference markings on paper ballots.
- **Standardization of Electoral Rolls -** Streamline the registration process for graduate and teacher voters to update rolls continuously.

Reference

The Hindu | Paper ballots used for MLC polls

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