

Political Micro-targeting

What is the issue?

- Social media platforms need to be regulated by a holistic data protection law that take issues such as political micro-targeting seriously.
- The Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 is the draft of the data protection law that was introduced recently.

What does the new draft law say?

- It empowers the Centre to notify social media platforms as significant data fiduciaries if those platforms'
 1. User base crosses a certain threshold and
 2. Actions may have an impact on electoral democracy.
- This provision merits serious discussion to ensure that digital tools are used for enhancing democracy through citizen engagement.
- It will also ensure that these digital tools are not for harvesting personal data for voter targeting.
- In the Internet age, any data protection law must be alive to the potential impact of social media companies in shaping public opinion.

How is today's world of political advertising?

- **Online presence** is a key source of competitive advantage.
- This realisation gave rise to strategic efforts by political parties to tap into the fragmented political discourse by catering to the individual.
- Earlier, the idea was to capture mass issues. But in the present day, the **focus of the campaign is the individual**.
- Over the years, political advertising firms have devised sophisticated tools to gather voter data and made proper campaign products out of it.
- The reason why this issue becomes important is that the passive users are just not aware of what they are being subjected to.

How political parties target individual voters?

- Political parties are increasingly employing data-driven approaches to target individual voters using tailor-made messages.
- Such profiling has raised huge concerns of data privacy for individuals and has become a burning issue for political debate.

- Therefore, the concerns related to regulation of the digital world are being debated in all jurisdictions which have experienced the impact of this technological advancement.
- The reason for these debates is common to all jurisdictions i.e. to arrest any negative externalities emerging out of the Internet.
- **Solution** - Any regulatory framework needs to have both supervisory mechanisms in place and effective law enforcement tools in its quiver.

Is this practice a characteristic of Indian politics?

- Not particularly. The US and European countries are equally affected by the impact of this unregulated practice of micro-targeting.
- This practice has raised some serious concerns with regard to,
 1. The kind of data that is being collected,
 2. The manner in which voters are being profiled,
 3. How transparent the process of profiling and targeting is,
 4. What the nature of functioning of organisations engaged in this business is, and
 5. How neutral globally present intermediaries such as Google are.

Why informational autonomy of the voter is under threat?

- It is under threat because the entire business of collecting personal data continues to remain **unregulated** and is also **proprietary in nature**.
- It is extremely difficult to trace the methods used by such firms to scrutinise the personal life and intimate details of the individual.
- Profiling the potential voter has become a thriving industry. So, there are extremely well-crafted techniques are used in electoral campaigning.

What would be the impact?

- There is serious harm to the country's democratic nature resulting on account of loss of informational autonomy.
- The liberating and anti-establishment potential of the Internet are considered as a promise for the health of a liberal democracy.
- At the same time, it can have serious ramifications if this potential is used by demagogues to spread fake news and propaganda.

What needs to be done?

- While Internet innovators have continued to develop more advanced technologies, the regulators have never been able to catch up with it.
- The scope of a data protection framework needs to be sensitive towards the magnitude of a variety of data usage.

- It is likely that within a few years, Indian political parties may use data effectively to target individual voters.
- It is to be seen how the privacy law responds to the implications of political micro-targeting.

Source: The Hindu

