Voting Process in India

Why in news?

The Supreme Court has decided to hear petitions seeking 100% cross-verification of the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips.

What is the history of voting process?

- **Early elections**- In the first two general elections (1952 and 1957), voters used a unique system where they dropped a blank ballot paper into a box designated for each candidate, identified by their election symbol.
- **Ballot papers**- From third general election onwards, traditional ballot papers featuring ballot papers featuring the names and symbols of candidates were introduced, voters would mark their choice with a stamp.
- **Trail of EVM**-In 1982 Electronic Voting Machine was first trailed in the Assembly constituency of *Paravur in Kerala*.
- **Widespread of EVM**- In 2001 EVMs are fully deployed across all booths during the Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, and West Bengal.

  By 2004 Lok Sabha elections, EVMs were used across all 543 constituencies.

- **ETPBS-** Electronically Transmitted Post Ballot System is introduced in 2016 allowing service voters like members of the armed forces and government employees on election duty remotely.
- **NOTA-** In 2013, India became the 14th country to institute negative voting through None of the Above (NOTA). However, it is not a “right to reject”.
- **VVPAT-** Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail was first used in by-election for *Noksen assembly seat in Nagaland*.

- **100% VVPAT backing-** The 2019 general elections saw EVMs backed with 100% VVPAT across all constituencies, ensuring an additional layer of verification for voters.

  Supreme Court has ruled that VVPAT is essential for maintaining free and fair election in Subramanian Swamy vs Election Commission of India

- **Judiciary opinion-** The Supreme Court has upheld that the use of EVMs in various judgements, affirming their validity in the electoral process.

International practices of EVMs
• **Western democracies**- Many have continued to use paper ballots. Countries like England, France, The Netherlands, and the U.S. have discontinued the use of EVMs for national or federal elections after trials in the last two decades. • **Germany-** The Supreme Court declared the use of the EVMs unconstitutional in 2009. • **Brazil-** It continues to use EVMs for their elections. • **Pakistan-** There were discussions and trials regarding the implementation of EVMs. • **Bangladesh-** It experimented with EVMs in a few constituencies

What are the features of EVMs?

- Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) is an electronic device for recording votes that consists of two Units –
  - Control Unit and
  - Balloting Unit.



- **Booth capturing prevention**-EVMs have curtailed booth capturing by limiting the vote casting rate, making it more time-consuming to cast false votes.
- **Elimination of invalid votes**- The issue of invalid votes, which was a significant problem with paper ballots, has been addressed by EVMs.
- **Environmental benefits**- With a large electorate, EVMs are *eco-friendly* as they reduce paper consumption.
- **Administrative convenience**-EVMs provide ease for polling officers on election day and enable faster, error-free counting.
- **Random allocation-**EVMs are randomly allocated to booths before polls.
- **Mock polls**- They are conducted to demonstrate the accuracy of EVMs and VVPAT before actual polling begins.
- **Transparency-** Serial numbers of EVMs and the total votes polled are shared with candidates' agents for verification during counting.
- **Security-** The Election Commission of India (ECI) has repeatedly assured that EVMs are *standalone devices* without external connectivity, thus mitigating the risk of hacking.

What are the challenges of EVMs?

- **Verifiability-** The current practice of matching EVM counts with VVPAT slips in five booths per assembly constituency/segment has been questioned for not being scientifically grounded, which could potentially overlook defective EVMs.
- **Susceptibility to hacking**- Various political parties and civil society activists have raised doubts about the security of EVMs, alleging that they are susceptible to hacking due to their electronic nature.
- **Voter privacy**- The current process allows for the identification of booth-wise polling behaviour by various political parties, they could potentially lead to profiling and intimidation of voters.

What lies ahead?

- A scientific approach should be adopted to determine the sample size for matching EVM counts with VVPAT slips, possibly by dividing states into larger regions.
- In the event of discrepancies, it's recommended to count all VVPAT slips in the affected region to ensure accuracy in the results.
- The introduction of 'totaliser' machines is proposed to aggregate votes from multiple EVMs, which would help maintain voter secrecy at the booth level.

Totaliser is a mechanism which allows votes from 14 booths to be counted together so that voters are saved from pre-poll intimidation and post-poll harassment.

References

1. The Hindu- Need of reforms in voting
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