

What presidential, V-P polls say about politics

Political decisions rarely have a singular motivation or a sole target audience. They are aimed at multiple constituencies, and packaged accordingly so that different constituents are able to relate to these in a distinct, and sometimes even contradictory, manner. This holds true for the 2022 presidential and vice-presidential election, and the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) nominees for the prestigious exercise. Droupadi Murmu has already been sworn in as India's 15th President, marking a historic journey and moment, and former West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankhar holds a decisive edge in the August 6 vice-presidential election.

The new appointees will steer the country through a significant phase — the 75th anniversary of Independence and that of the formation of the Republic, an important general election, the constitution of a landmark delimitation commission that might forever alter Centre-state relations, and the 100th year of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) — and so it is important to explore the symbolic, political and long-term rationale behind the nominations. Four aspects immediately become clear.

First, while electoral logic remains an important factor in political decisions, it will be naive to reduce the current set of appointments to the instrumental logic of getting the votes of the communities these appointees represent. Those are likely to have been incidental to the decision, not the proximate cause.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for example, already receives a substantial chunk of votes from the tribal communities (it won 31 of the 47 parliamentary seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes in the 2019 general elections). And, the party must be aware that Dhankhar's professed identity as *kisan putra* (farmer's son) and a Jat is unlikely to drastically change its position among these two communities, especially given that the governor doesn't hold any significant grassroots sway.

Going into 2024, the political incumbent appears reasonably confident of returning to office. Therefore, the party will be looking to use these appointments to weave a grand ideological narrative that leads to regime consolidation — especially on the centenary of the RSS. The identity of the person who occupies the country's top constitutional office at that time is a powerful message, not only internally to the party and the cadre, but also to the communities, the country and internationally.

Second, while both offices are ceremonial, the party appears to have made a clear distinction between the two. The appointment to the office of President is to help absorb the logic of social justice and redistribution within its ideological umbrella of Hindutva. The individual stories of the rise of President Ram Nath Kovind and President Murmu against all odds — personal, political, social and economic — make for compelling narratives, and work as ringing endorsements of the regime in the public domain.

The President is the guardian of the Republic. To have Kovind in 2019 and

Murmu in 2024 executing the oath of office to the Prime Minister (Narendra Modi, of course, is the frontrunner for this position at the moment) etches a powerful image, allowing the party to project itself as the champion of social inclusion, underline the Opposition's inability to break out of old-style politics and give hope of upward mobility, dignity and inclusion to the party's relatively young support bases in marginalised communities. The symbolic dimension of the decision to nominate the next President, therefore, is far more important than the immediate electoral gain.

The expectation from the office of the vice-president, though, is neither one of symbolism nor ideological cohesion and expansion. This is the third takeaway. The appointment is largely driven by realpolitik considerations as the responsibility of the

vice-president includes presiding over the Rajya Sabha and acting as the chancellor of central universities, among other such functions.

While the reasons for the appointment of both Venkaiah Naidu and Dhankhar may be different, they are both deeply political picks of people with the demonstrable ability to keep the Opposition flanks in check, often using the rulebook. Dhankhar's nomination

is also signal to the BJP cadre that while the party may be facing a difficult political situation in West Bengal, the state remains a top concern for the leadership.

Fourth, the BJP sympathisers may see these appointments as representation of different regions of India — Kovind (North) and Naidu (South) in the previous term, and Murmu (East) and Dhankhar (West) in the current term. However, the party leadership through its vice-presidential nomination has clearly indicated that the pre-2000 era of considering V-Ps as the potential President is over. V-P nominees cannot harbour the ambition of being elevated to higher office any longer. The office of vice-presidency is to advance political purposes, and the nomination to this office will reflect this expediency — at least while the BJP is in power.

In conclusion, the reimagining of the purposes of these offices, delinking them and mobilising public opinion for a largely symbolic election, fit into a larger picture of institutional transformation under the current government, one that indicates that the Republic is moving into a new phase.

Whether it be transforming the role or purpose of certain public offices, ending bodies such as the erstwhile Planning Commission and a churn in the federal compact, the signs of these changes are telling. The contours of this project will only become sharper in the years to come. However, to interpret these changes solely through the prism of authoritarianism would be to miss the democratic imagination of this project, which is being brought about with popular support and is rooted in public sympathy. It is to this end that a large section of citizens is being engaged in the indirect elections of largely ceremonial offices.



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