



The Election Commission of India: 1952 and 2024 Lok Sabha Elections

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The first Lok Sabha elections in India took place from October 1951 to February 1952. The first Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) was Sukumar Sen, who was appointed in March 1950. The same year, Parliament passed the *Representation of People Act*, which lays down the laws regarding the conduct of elections to both Houses of Parliament, Legislative Assembly or Council in states, qualifications, and disqualifications for membership of these Houses, corruption, and other offences, as well as disputes related to elections. All this was happening at a time when most of the population was illiterate, with widespread caste, class, religious and gender disparity in the society. With this backdrop, India chose to adopt universal adult franchise in the Constitution of India. “Indians became voters before they were citizens”, as in September 1947, preparation for the first draft electoral roll with the idea of universal franchise had started within the Constituent Assembly Secretariat, under the guidance of B.N. Rau, before the Constitution was enacted.

The exercise of conducting the first ever elections was massive, with both national and state elections to take place at the same time. A total of 2,500,000 steel ballot boxes were used, along with 111,095 wooden boxes when the steel ones were found to be insufficient. In remote hill villages, bridges had to be constructed, while for small islands in the Indian Ocean, naval vessels took the electoral rolls to the voting booths. The political parties had to be made identifiable to an illiterate population; towards this end, easily recognizable symbols were assigned to them, such as a bullock, hut, elephant or a lamp. Voters had to walk till the polling booth, vote for the State Legislative Assembly, and then the Parliament. Polling in Chini and Pangri constituencies in Himachal Pradesh took place 2 months before the rest of India because of snowfall, and these regions could not be accessed

during the winters – this practice of preponing or postponing elections in some districts based on weather conditions, continues till today. To conduct **elections in Manipur and Tripura**, the support of hill chiefs had to be secured by Sukumar Sen, while in **Rajasthan**, the Election Commission of India (ECI) arranged army vehicles for Barmer and Jalore districts for the assistance of polling parties. When these got **stuck in sand**, the jeeps of the state government were sent to districts to ensure that the polling was completed. In all of the elections conducted after the first Lok Sabha elections, the ECI continues to ensure that every voter gets easy access to a voting booth, improving on their efforts to conduct free and fair elections with each election cycle.

The voter turnout was **44.87%** in the first Lok Sabha elections, and for these elections, the size of the electorate was **173.2 million**, with **1,874 candidates**. In 1989, the voting age was reduced to 18 years from 21 years, so the electorate size increased. In the 2019 elections, the voter turnout was **67.1%**, there were **8,054** candidates and the electorate size was **912 million**. The estimated number of registered voters for the 2024 elections is **970 million**.

On 14 March 2024, the high-level committee on ‘One Nation, One Election’ submitted its report to the President. If the next government were to take up the recommendations of this committee, it would require a **Constitutional Amendment** to conduct elections to Lok Sabha, state assemblies, municipalities and panchayats at the same time. While the initial elections took place simultaneously, at the national and state levels, this changed over a period. One of the reasons was the state and/or national governments not completing their five-year terms. As a result, national and state level elections started being conducted at separate times. When the elections take place, they are now held in phases to ensure their smooth conduct. The ECI ensures that adequate security forces are present so that booth capturing and election violence do not take place. Voting booths are set up within 2km of every registered voter. The 2014 elections took place in nine phases, the 2019 elections in seven, and the 2024 Lok Sabha elections have also been conducted in seven phases. The eighteenth Lok Sabha elections began on 19th April 2024, and will conclude on 1st June 2024, with the results to be announced on **4th June 2024**.

The ECI has played a significant role in shaping Indian elections, with changes being introduced by the CECs to the way the experience of democratic participation gets strengthened with every election cycle. The 1951-52 elections were the first elections after India’s independence, while the 2024 elections will lead to the eighteenth Lok Sabha. Party systems have changed, and the country has

come a long way since the days of booth capturing, to ensure the comfort of every registered voter to reach the polling station. Efforts are constantly being made by the ECI for free and fair elections. While challenges remain, it must be emphasized that elections in India are symbolic of the democratic experience in India being strengthened with each election.

Author Biography

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