

# ELECTORAL POLITICS NOTES

## Why Do We Need Elections?

Elections take place regularly in any democracy. There are more than 100 countries in the world in which elections take place to choose people's representatives. The mechanism by which people can choose their representatives at regular intervals and change them whenever they want to is called an **election**.

In an election the voters make many choices:

- They can choose who will make laws for them.
- They can choose who will form the government and take major decisions.
- They can choose the party whose policies will guide the government and law making.

## What Makes an Election Democratic?

Minimum conditions of a democratic election include the following points.

1. Everyone should be able to choose their own representative.
2. Parties and candidates should be free to contest elections and should offer some real choice to the voters.
3. Elections must be held regularly after every few years.
4. The candidate preferred by the people should get elected.
5. Elections should be conducted in a free and fair manner where people can choose as they really wish.

## Is it Good to have Political Competition?

Elections are all about political competition. This competition takes various forms. At the constituency level, it takes the form of competition among several candidates. Here are a few reasons that support political competition as being good for people.

1. Regular electoral competition provides incentives to political parties and leaders.
2. Political parties know that if they raise issues that people want to be raised, their popularity and chances of victory will increase in the next elections. On the contrary, if they fail to satisfy the voters with their work, they will not be able to win again.
3. If a political party is motivated only by the desire to be in power, despite that, it will be forced to serve the people.

## What is Our System of Election?

Elections are held in India in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha (Assembly) regularly after every 5 years. After 5 years, the term of all the elected representatives comes to an end.

Elections held in all constituencies at the same time, either on the same day or within a few days is called a **General Election**. Sometimes elections are held only for one constituency to fill the vacancy caused by death or resignation of a member. This is called a **By-Election**.

## Electoral Constituency

India is divided into different areas for the purpose of elections. These areas are called **electoral constituencies**. The voters who live in an area elect one representative.

- For Lok Sabha elections, India is divided into 543 constituencies. The representative elected from each constituency is called a **Member of Parliament** or an MP.
- Each state is divided into a specific number of Assembly constituencies. In this case, the elected representative is called the **Member of Legislative Assembly or an MLA**. Each Parliamentary constituency has within it several assembly constituencies.

The same principle applies for Panchayat and Municipal elections. Each village or town is divided into several '**wards**' that are like constituencies. Each ward elects one member of the village or the urban local body. Sometimes these constituencies are counted as '**seats**', for each constituency represents one seat in the assembly.

## Reserved Constituencies

Some constituencies are reserved for people who belong to the Scheduled Castes [SC] and Scheduled Tribes [ST]. In the Lok Sabha, 84 seats are reserved for the SC and 47 for the ST.

- In **SC reserved constituency**, only someone who belongs to the Scheduled Caste can stand for election.
- Only those belonging to the **Scheduled Tribes** can contest an election from a constituency reserved for ST.

In many states, seats in rural (panchayat) and urban (municipalities and corporations) local bodies are now reserved for Other Backward Classes (OBC) and women candidates as well.

## Voters' List

In a democratic election, the list of those who are eligible to vote is prepared much before the election and given to everyone, which is officially called the **Electoral Roll** and is commonly known as the **Voters' List**. It is the responsibility of the government to get the names of all the eligible voters put on the voters' list.

The voters are required to carry Election Photo Identity Card [EPIC] when they go out to vote, so that no one can vote for someone else. But the card is not yet compulsory for voting as voters can show many other proofs of identity, like the ration card or the driving licence.

## Nomination of Candidates

Anyone who can be a voter can also become a candidate in elections. The candidate should be a minimum of 25 years age. Every person who wishes to contest an election has to fill out a 'nomination form' and give some money as 'security deposit'. The candidate has to make a legal declaration, giving full details of:

1. Serious criminal cases pending against the candidate
2. Details of the assets and liabilities of the candidate and his or her family
3. Educational qualifications of the candidate

This information is made available to the public so that voters can make their decision on the basis of the information provided by the candidates.

## Election Campaign

The election campaigns are conducted to have a free and open discussion about who is a better

Representative and in turn, which party will make a better government. In India, Election Campaigns take place for a two-week period between the announcement of the final list of candidates and the date of polling. During this period the candidates contact their voters, political leaders address election meetings and political parties mobilise their supporters.

Some of the successful slogans given by different political parties in various elections:

- Save Democracy
- Land to the Tiller
- Protect the Self-Respect of the Telugus

According to India's election law, no party or candidate can:

1. Bribe or threaten voters
2. Appeal to them in the name of caste or religion
3. Use government resources for election campaign
4. Spend more than 25 lakh in a constituency for a Lok Sabha election or 10 lakh in a constituency in an Assembly election

If any Political Party does so, their election can be rejected by the court. In addition to the laws, all the political parties in our country have agreed to a Model Code of Conduct for election campaigns. According to this, no party or candidate can:

- Use any place of worship for election propaganda;
- Use government vehicles, aircraft and officials for elections
- Once elections are announced, Ministers shall not lay foundation stones of any projects, take any big policy decisions or make any promises of providing public facilities

## Polling and Counting of Votes

The day when the voters cast or 'poll' their vote is called the **election day**. The voting is done in the following manner.

1. Every person whose name is on the voters' list can go to a nearby 'polling booth'.
2. Once the voter goes inside the booth, the election officials identify her, put a mark on her finger and allow her to cast her vote.
3. An agent of each candidate is allowed to sit inside the polling booth and ensure that the voting takes place in a fair way

A **ballot paper** is a sheet of paper on which the names of the contesting candidates along with party names and symbols are listed. The ballot paper was used earlier. Nowadays, **electronic voting machines (EVM)** are used to record votes.

- The machine shows the names of the candidates and the party symbols.
- The voter has to just press the button against the name of the candidate she wants to give her vote to.
- Once the polling is over, all the EVMs are sealed and taken to a secure place.

- A few days later, all the EVMs are opened and the votes secured by each candidate are counted.
- The candidate who secures the highest number of votes from a constituency is declared elected.

## What Makes Election in India Democratic?

### 1) Independent Election Commission

In India, elections are conducted by the Election Commission (EC). The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is appointed by the President of India. Election Commission is independent and has a wide-range of powers which are:

1. EC takes decisions on every aspect of conduct and control of elections from the announcement of elections to the declaration of results.
2. It implements the Code of Conduct and punishes any candidate or party that violates it.
3. During the election period, the EC can order the government to follow some guidelines, to prevent the use and misuse of governmental power to enhance its chances to win elections, or to transfer some government officials.
4. When on election duty, government officers work under the control of the EC and not the government.

### 2) Popular Participation

The quality of the election process can also be checked by seeing the participation of people. People's participation in the election is measured by voter **turnout figures**. Turnout indicates the per cent of eligible voters who actually cast their vote.

1. In India, the poor, illiterate and underprivileged people vote in larger proportion as compared to the rich and privileged sections.
2. Common people in India feel that through elections they can bring pressure on political parties to adopt policies and programmes favourable to them.
3. The interest of voters in election related activities has been increasing over the years.

### 3) Acceptance of Election Outcome

One final test of the free and fairness of the election is the outcome of the election.

1. The ruling parties routinely lose elections in India both at the national and state level.
2. In the US, an incumbent or 'sitting' elected representative rarely loses an election. In India, about half of the sitting MPs or MLAs lose elections.
3. Candidates who are known to have spent a lot of money on 'buying votes' and those with known criminal connections often lose elections.
4. Barring very few disputed elections, the electoral outcomes are usually accepted as 'people's verdict' by the defeated party.

## Challenges to Free and Fair Elections

Elections in India are basically free and fair. Sometimes this may not be true for every constituency. There are many limitations and challenges to Indian elections. These include:

1. Candidates and parties with a lot of money enjoy a big and unfair advantage over smaller parties.
2. Candidates with criminal connections have been able to push others out of the electoral race and to secure a 'ticket' from major parties.
3. Tickets are distributed to relatives from their families.
4. Elections offer little choice to ordinary citizens as major parties are quite similar to each other, both in policies and practice.
5. Smaller parties and independent candidates suffer a huge disadvantage compared to bigger parties.