

Broad Guidelines for Conduct of General Elections/Bye-elections during COVID-19

After onset of COVID-19 pandemic in India, Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) have been issuing guidelines from time to time. In their latest circular dated 29th July, 2020, Ministry of Home Affairs has issued comprehensive guidelines/directives to be followed countrywide. Similarly, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare has also issued SOP on disinfection, sanitization, and prevention for containing COVID-19.

The Commission on 17th July, 2020, sought views/suggestions of National/State Political Parties till 31st July, 2020, which on request, Commission further extended the period till 11th August, 2020. The Commission has considered the views/suggestions received from various Political Parties and Chief Electoral Officers of States/UTs on election campaign and public meetings.

Keeping in view the above, following broad guidelines have been framed with respect to key activities of the conduct of elections, considering the upcoming General Elections and bye-elections in various States/UTs during the period of COVID-19:

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1.	<p><u>General Guidelines to be followed during entire election processes for all persons</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Every person shall wear face mask during every election related activity.<li>2) At the entry of hall/ room/ premises used for election purposes:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>(a) Thermal Scanning of all persons shall be carried out;<li>(b) Sanitizer, soap and water shall be made available.<li>3) Social distancing shall be maintained as per the extant COVID-19 guidelines of the State Govt. and Ministry of Home Affairs.<li>4) As far as practicable, large halls should be identified and utilized to ensure social distancing norms.

	5) Adequate number of vehicles shall be mobilized for movement of polling personnel, security personnel to ensure compliance of COVID-19 guidelines.
2.	<p><u>Nodal Health Officer</u></p> <p>Nodal Health Officer shall be designated for the State, the District and the Assembly Constituency to oversee COVID-19 related arrangements and, preventive measures during entire electoral process.</p>
3.	<p><u>EVMs/VVPATs</u></p> <p>1) First & Second randomization and preparation of EVMs/VVPATs shall be done in large halls.</p> <p>2) Sanitizers shall be provided in sufficient quantity for use during the process.</p> <p>3) Gloves shall be made available to each official handling EVM/VVPAT.</p>
4.	<p><u>Training and capacity Building</u></p> <p>1) As far as practicable, training of election officials will be organized in decentralized manner at large halls.</p> <p>2) Training for election officials may be organized through online mode.</p> <p>3) All PPTs, training materials, relevant documents, topic wise video clips, question papers for self-assessment may be uploaded in app/ portal so that any election official can access it as per requirement.</p> <p>4) Sufficient number of Polling/Counting/Poll related staffs shall also be kept in reserve by DEO/RO, to replace in case any polling personnel displays COVID-19 symptoms.</p>
5.	<p><u>Nomination Process</u></p> <p>I. Following additional options to facilitate online mode are hereby provided:</p> <p>1) Nomination form will also be available online on the website of CEO/DEO. An intending candidate may fill in it online and its print may be taken for submitting before the Returning Officer as specified in Form-1 (Rule-3 of Conduct of Election Rules 1961).</p> <p>2) Affidavit may also be filled in online on the website of CEO/DEO and its print can be taken and after notarization it may be submitted along with the nomination form before the Returning Officer.</p>

	<p>3) Candidate may deposit security money through online mode at the designated platform. However, a candidate will continue to have the option of deposit in cash in the treasury.</p> <p>4) Candidate may have the option to seek his/her elector certification for the purpose of nomination online.</p> <p>II. Further, Commission has directed:</p> <p>1) Number of persons to accompany candidate for submission of Nomination is restricted to two (2). (This is in supersession of existing Para 5.8.1 of Returning Officer’s Handbook 2019)</p> <p>2) Number of vehicles for the purposes of nomination is restricted to two (2). (This is in supersession of existing Para 5.8.1 of Returning Officer’s Handbook 2019)</p> <p>3) Returning Officer’s chamber should have sufficient space to perform the functions of nomination, scrutiny and symbol allocation following social distancing norms.</p> <p>4) Returning Officer should allot staggered time in advance to prospective candidates.</p> <p>5) Large space for waiting for candidate(s) should be arranged.</p> <p>6) All steps required to be taken for the submission of nomination form and affidavit shall continue to operate as per the provisions contained in the Representation of the People Act, 1951.</p>
<p>6.</p>	<p><u>Election Material</u></p> <p>Election Material Kit will be prepared in a spacious and sufficiently large hall following all safety, sanitation and social distancing measures.</p>
<p>7.</p>	<p><u>Distribution and Collection of Election Material</u></p> <p>1) Large halls/spaces should be identified for distribution/collection of election material.</p> <p>2) As far as practicable, it should be organized in decentralized manner.</p> <p>3) Prior staggered time should be allocated to the polling teams for distribution/collection of election material.</p>

8.	<p><u>Timing of 3rd randomization:</u></p> <p>Timing for 3rd randomization of polling staff be increased from 24 hrs to 72 hrs in order to avoid large gathering of polling staff at dispatch centres.</p> <p>(This is in supersession of ECI No. 464/Inst/2008/EPS dated 19th September, 2008)</p>
9.	<p><u>No. of electors in Polling Station</u></p> <p>There shall be maximum 1000 electors instead of 1500 electors in a polling station. (Commission's Instruction No.23/SEC/2020-ERS, dated 23rd July, 2020)</p>
10.	<p><u>Polling Station Arrangements</u></p> <p>Commission has issued detailed instructions for assured minimum facilities at each polling station. Now, in view of COVID-19 situation, following additional facilities/steps should be taken:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Mandatory sanitization of Polling Station, preferably, a day before the poll. 2) Thermal Scanner at the entry point of every polling station location. 3) Thermal Checking of voters at entry point of polling station location/Polling station, either by polling staff or Para Medical staff or Asha worker. 4) If temperature is above the set norms of MoHFW at first reading, then it will be checked twice and if it remains, then the elector shall be provided with token/certificate and will be asked to come for voting <u>at the last hour of poll</u>. At the last hour of poll, such electors shall be facilitated voting, strictly following COVID-19 related preventive measures. 5) Help Desk for distribution of token to the voters of first come first basis so that they do not wait in the queue. 6) Marker to demonstrate social distancing for queue. 7) Earmarking circle for 15-20 persons of 2 yards (6 feet) distance for voters standing in the queue depending on the availability of space. There shall be three queues each, for male, female, and PwD/ Senior citizen voters. 8) The services of BLOs, volunteers etc may be engaged to monitor and regulate social distancing norms strictly.

- 9) One shaded waiting areas with chairs, dari etc. will be provided, for male and female separately, within the polling station premises so that voters can participate in voting without safety concerns.
- 10) Wherever possible, Booth App shall be used at the polling station.
- 11) Soap and Water shall be provided at the entry/exit point of every polling station.
- 12) Sanitizer should be provided at the entry/exit point of every polling station.
- 13) Face Masks in reserves for those electors who are not carrying the mask will be kept.
- 14) Awareness posters on COVID-19 should be displayed at visible locations.
- 15) Sitting arrangement in polling station for the polling personnel and polling agents shall be made as per the norms of social distancing.
- 16) If polling agent or counting agent is having temperature above the prescribed limit, then their reliever shall be allowed by Presiding Officer, who will keep a record accordingly.
- 17) During the process of identification of voter, the voters will require to lower the facemask for identification, when required.
- 18) At any given time, only 1(one) voter shall be allowed to stand in front of each polling official maintaining social distance.
- 19) Hand gloves shall be provided to the voter, for signing on the voter register and pressing button of EVM for voting.
- 20) Sanitizers shall be kept inside the booth at appropriate locations with clear direction for the use by voters.
- 21) COVID-19 patients who are quarantined will be allowed to cast their vote **at the last hour of the poll day** at their respective Polling Stations, under the supervision of health authorities, strictly following COVID-19 related preventive measures. Sector Magistrates shall coordinate this in their allocated polling stations.
- 22) In case of those voters who are residing in the area notified as containment zone, guidelines shall be issued separately.

<p>11.</p>	<p><u>Kit for Polling Officer</u></p> <p>The following items shall be provided to every polling official and security personnel (Other than those where PPEs are needed) in addition to other prescribed items:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Mask 2) Sanitizer 3) Face-Shield 4) Gloves
<p>12.</p>	<p><u>Postal Ballot</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Option of Postal Ballot facility has been extended to the electors of following categories: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Electors, who are marked as Persons with Disabilities (PwD) b. Electors above the age of 80 years c. Electors employed in notified Essential services d. Electors who are COVID- 19 positive/suspect and in quarantine (home/institutional) 2) Guidelines for each of these categories are being issued separately.
<p>13.</p>	<p><u>Campaign by the political parties/contesting candidates</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Door to Door Campaign- Subject to any other restriction(s) including extant COVID-19 guidelines, a group of 5 (five) persons including candidates, excluding security personnel, if any, is allowed to do door to door campaigning. 2) Road Shows - The convoy of vehicles should be broken after every 5 (five) vehicles instead of 10 vehicles (excluding the security vehicles, if any). The interval between two sets of convoy of vehicles should be half an hour instead of gap of 100 meters. (In supersession of Para 5.8.1 of Returning Officer's Handbook 2019) 3) Election Meetings - Public gatherings/ rallies may be conducted subject to adherence to extant COVID-19 guidelines. District Election Officer should take following steps for this purpose: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) District Election Officer should, in advance, identify dedicated grounds for public gathering with clearly marked Entry/Exit points.

	<p>(b) In all such identified grounds, the District Election Officer should, in advance, put markers to ensure social distancing norms by the attendees.</p> <p>(c) Nodal District Health Officer should be involved in the process to ensure that all COVID-19 related guidelines are adhered to by all concerned in the district.</p> <p>(d) District Election Officer and District Superintendent of Police should ensure that the number of attendees does not exceed the limit prescribed by State Disaster Management Authority for public gatherings.</p> <p>(e) DEO should depute Sector Health Regulators to oversee that COVID-19 instructions/guidelines are being followed during these meetings.</p> <p>(f) The political parties and candidates concerned should ensure that all COVID-19 related requirement like face masks, sanitizers, thermal scanning etc. are fulfilled during each of these activities.</p> <p>(g) Non-compliance of Instructions – <i>Anybody violating instructions on COVID-19 measures will be liable to proceeded against as per the provisions of Section 51 to 60 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, besides legal action under Section 188 of the IPC, and other legal provisions as applicable, as specified in Order No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A) dated 29th July, 2020 of Ministry of Home Affairs.</i> District Election Officer should bring this to the notice of all concerned.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4) Allocation of public spaces must be done using Suvidha app in the manner already prescribed by Commission.</p>
<p>14.</p>	<p><u>Strong-room Arrangement</u></p> <p>1) Strong Room should be sanitized before the storage of polled EVMs.</p> <p>2) Social Distancing and other safety norms shall be followed for each activity.</p>
<p>15.</p>	<p><u>Counting of votes</u></p> <p>1) Not more than 7 counting tables should be allowed in a counting hall. Hence, counting of votes of a constituency may be considered at 3-4 halls by appointing additional Assistant Returning Officers. (In supersession of instructions dated 30th April, 2014)</p> <p>2) Carrying cases of CUs/VVPATs should be sanitized before placing over counting tables.</p>

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| <p>3) Display of result from the Control Units may be displayed on a large screen to avoid accommodation of large number of counting agents.</p> <p>4) The counting centers shall be disinfected before, during and after the counting.</p> <p>5) For counting of Postal Ballots, additional number of AROs may be required. If required, Postal Ballots may also be counted in a separate hall under the supervision of the Returning Officer/Assistant Returning officer.</p> |
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Based on these broad guidelines, a detailed COVID-19 related comprehensive plan will be prepared at the State level, taking local conditions into account. In case of General Elections, three-layer plan will be prepared in consultation with the concerned Nodal Health Officers: of AC, District, and State levels. In case of bye-elections, the plans will be prepared at the District and AC levels in consultation with respective Nodal Health Officers of district and AC. In case more than one district is involved, such plans will be prepared by the Returning Officer of the Constituency in coordination with the concerned DEOs.