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Expert Explains: How India's polling stations work

As India holds its Lok Sabha elections, a look at the what goes on behind the scenes in polling stations, where Indian citizens cast their vote.

Written by Ravi Mittal

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A crowded polling station at Baramati on May 7. (Express photograph by Arul Horizon)

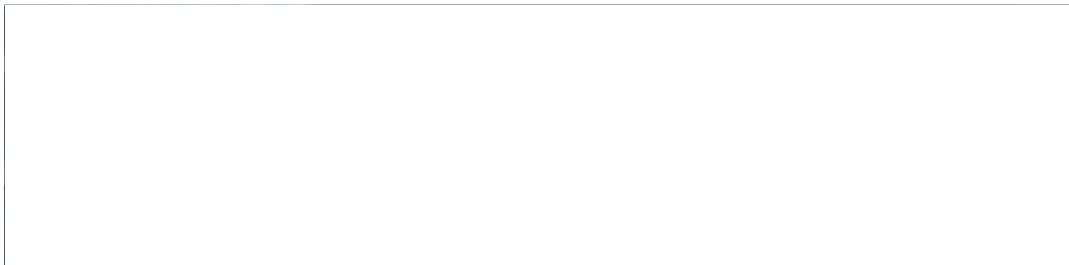
During the ongoing **Lok Sabha elections**, 96.8 crore electors are enrolled to vote at 10.5 lakh polling stations spread out nationwide, from the heart of bustling metropolises to the most remote corners of the country. Here is how India's polling stations work.

Setting up polling stations: norms and principles

Under Section 25 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RPA), the district election officer (DEO) is assigned the responsibility to set up and publish the list of polling stations in their district.

There are some principles on the basis of which polling stations are set up. These include ensuring that voters do not have to travel more than two km to cast their vote, a station has a minimum area of 20 sq m, a station serves at most 1,500 electors, and a village with over 300 voters is provided with a polling station.

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These principles, however, are not set in stone. Polling stations can even cater to less than 300 voters in case access is a problem, say in rugged terrain. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh's Malogam polling station caters to only a single voter.

Conversely, in cases where the number of electors exceeds 1,500, auxiliary polling stations are set up, preferably in the same building. In urban areas, one building can have a maximum of four polling stations, whereas in rural areas, it can have at most two.

Locations for polling stations are chosen carefully, preferably in government or semi-government institutions. Private buildings are avoided unless absolutely necessary — they can be requisitioned with the written consent of the owner, or forcefully under Section 160 of the RPA.



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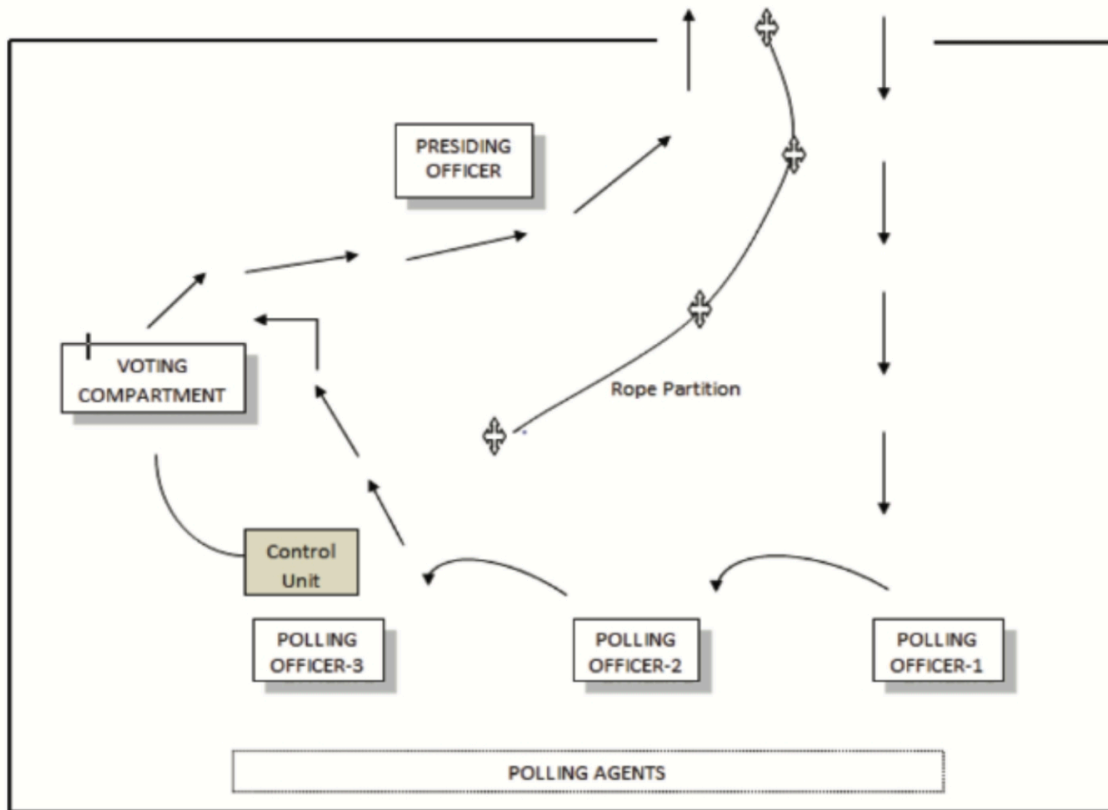
The list of polling stations undergoes verification and updation during annual electoral roll revisions. The draft list is prepared with input from local political parties and citizens, after finalisation with the Election Commission of India's (ECI's) approval, it is distributed to parties and candidates, with extra copies available for sale.

Layout and some facilities

There are separate entrance and exit points for voters, even if only one door is available. This is done with temporary fencing using bamboo and ropes. The voting compartment, constructed from opaque corrugated plastic sheet or steel grey flex board, measures at least 24 x 24 x 30 inches (length x width x height), and is positioned away from windows or doors.

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A comprehensive gap analysis is conducted before elections to ensure the provision of Assured Minimum Facilities (AMF) at each polling station, which ensures smooth voting experiences and efficient polling personnel duties. Accordingly, adequate furniture, proper lighting arrangements, clear signage, and separate toilets for male and female voters are ensured.



Source: ECI

Voter facilitation posters are also displayed prominently, providing information such as the list of candidates, identification documents required, etc.

As the current elections are taking place during the peak of the Indian summer, the ECI has taken some steps to address the challenges caused by heatwaves, first being to identify polling stations which are likely to face heat waves based on India Meteorological Department data. These stations are then equipped with adequate shade structures like tents, canopies, or umbrellas, seating, cooling devices like fans, proper ventilation, drinking water, and ORS. The polling staff is also supplied with medical kits, and handbills on 'Dos and Don'ts' during a heat stroke, and trained to recognise and respond to heat-related illnesses.

Provisions for Persons with Disabilities (PwD)

There are some 88.4 lakh Persons with Disabilities (PwD) registered to vote in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. The ECI has strict norms to ensure that they too can exercise their franchise without a hitch.

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All polling stations must have a ramp with a maximum 1:12 gradient, and provide wheelchairs and designated parking spaces close to the station to PwD voters. They are also allowed to cast their vote without waiting in queues, with the ECI also providing transport facilities for voters with impaired mobility (such as PwD and senior citizens). PwDs can use ECI's Saksham App to book wheelchairs, pick and drop service, get assistance at the polling booth, etc.

Volunteers from National Cadet Corps/National Service Scheme/Scouts & Guides assist in queue management, and help PwD and senior citizens. For the visually impaired, electronic voting machines (EVMs) and dummy ballot papers come with Braille facilities. Moreover, clear signages are used in the International Symbol of Access in blue and white to identify assistance counters, toilets, etc. quickly.

People inside a polling station, voting day restrictions

Only specific individuals are permitted access inside a polling station. These include registered electors, polling officers, candidates, one polling agent per candidate at a time, authorised media personnel, public servants on election duty, ECI-appointed observers, micro observers, videographers, photographers, and webcasting staff for critical/sensitive polling stations, a child in arms accompanying an elector, a person assisting a blind or infirm voter, and any others admitted by the Presiding Officer for voter identification or assistance purposes, whenever required.

A polling party comprises a Presiding Officer and three Polling Officers. The first Polling Officer verifies the elector's identity, the second applies indelible ink on their left index finger, maintains the voters' register, and issues voter slips. The third Polling Officer takes back the voter slip issued by the second polling officer, manages the EVM's control unit, and ensures that an elector has been properly inked before being allowed to vote.

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Sector Officers or Zonal Magistrates are appointed for around 10-12 polling stations to facilitate the link between polling staff and the Returning Officer. Micro Observers are deployed in vulnerable areas to report any deviations. Booth Level Officers (BLO) at the Voter Assistance Booths assist voters in finding their polling booth and serial numbers in the alphabetically arranged electoral roll. Digital photographers capture critical events such as mock polls, sealing of EVMs, etc.

Village Officers assist in identifying electors whenever required, and security personnel ensure the smooth conduct of elections.

On the day of polling, there are separate queues for men and women voters — with two women allowed to vote before each man. There is also a prohibition on any political propaganda, use of cameras, mobile phones, and canvassing within a 100 metre radius of the polling station, with a penalty of arrest without warrant under Section 130 of the RPA. Candidates can set up their booths beyond 200 m of the polling station, and there are also restriction on the use of loudspeakers.

Critical polling stations

Critical polling stations are those where the ECI takes some extra measures to ensure the security and integrity of the voting process.

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These include ones in vulnerable areas, areas with abnormal law & order situations, those with unusually high (over 90%, with over 75% votes polled in favour of one candidate), or low (under 10%) voter turnout rates. Polling stations where re-polling is held due to electoral offences, with instances of violence on polling day in the last five years, or with a disproportionate number of Absentee, Shifted, and Dead (ASD) voters may also be deemed critical polling stations by the ECI.

In such stations, the ECI conducts pre-poll confidence building initiatives, gets regular feedback from candidates and intelligence agencies, legally binds identified trouble-mongers, and uses preventive detention under appropriate sections of law. On the day of the poll, Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and Micro Observers are deployed.

The author is the District Collector and the DEO of Jashpur, [Chhattisgarh](#)

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