

Non-Resident Indian (NRI) voting in India

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In news

Recently, the Election Commission of India (ECI) approached the Law Ministry to permit NRIs to cast their votes from overseas through postal ballots

Key highlights

The Election Commission informed the government that it is “technically and administratively ready” to extend the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS) to voters abroad for elections next year in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

The current process of voting for an NRI

- As of now, an NRI can vote in the constituency in which her place of residence, as mentioned in the passport, is located.
- **NRI can only vote in person** and will have to produce his/her passport in original at the polling station for establishing identity.
- Voting rights for NRIs were introduced only in 2011, through an amendment to the Representation of the People Act 1950.

The current population of NRIs

- As per the UN report of 2015, India’s diaspora population is the largest in the world at 16 million people.
- Registration of NRI voters, in comparison, has been very low: a little over one lakh overseas Indians registered as voters in India, according to the EC.

- In the recent Lok Sabha elections, around 25,000 of them flew to India to vote.

What will be the process of voting by postal ballots, if approved by the government?

- As per ECI's proposal, any NRI interested in voting through the postal ballot in an election will have to inform the Returning Officer (RO) not later than five days after the notification of the election.
- After receiving such information, the RO will dispatch the ballot paper electronically.
- The Indian diaspora voters will download the ballot paper, mark their preference on the printout and send it back along with a declaration attested by an officer appointed by the diplomatic or consular representative of India in the country where the NRI is resident.

Voting power to NRIs: The story so far

- ECI began to look for options to enable NRIs to vote from overseas after it received several requests, including one from former Rajya Sabha MP and industrialist Naveen Jindal and the Ministry of Overseas Affairs,
- **A 12-member committee was set up after the 2014 Lok Sabha elections** to study mainly three options – voting by post, voting at an Indian mission abroad and online voting.
- The committee ruled out online polling as it felt this could compromise “secrecy of voting”. It also shot down the proposal to vote at Indian missions abroad as they do not have adequate resources.
- **In 2015, the panel finally recommended that NRIs should be given the “additional alternative options of e-postal ballot and proxy voting”,** apart from voting in person.
- Under proxy voting, a registered elector can delegate his voting power to a representative. **The Law Ministry**

accepted the recommendation on proxy voting.

What is the situation in other countries?

Voting by expatriates differs from country to country, for example:

- A British citizen living abroad can register as an overseas voter for up to 15 years after leaving the UK, as long as he is a British or Irish citizen and was a registered voter in the UK in the last 15 years.
- USA's expatriates enjoy voting rights in the US irrespective of how long they have been living abroad. They can vote for federal office candidates in the primary and general elections.