

What are postal ballots?

December 8, 2022

In news— When the votes for an election are being counted, you must have often heard that the postal ballots are counted first.

About Postal Ballots-

- While a majority of votes are generally logged on specially designed electronic voting machines (EVMs), some votes are also logged in the form of postal ballots (PBs).
- According to the Election Commission's rules, **PBs are the first to be counted, with EVMs following a minimum of half an hour after the counting of PBs begins**. Hence, early trends that are reported after counting begins are often a reflection of the votes logged through PBs.

Who can vote using PBs?

- **A restricted set of voters can exercise postal voting**. Through this facility, **a voter can cast her vote remotely by recording her preference on an official ballot paper** and sending it back to the election officer before counting.
- **Members of the armed forces** like the Army, Navy and Air Force, **members of the armed police force** of a state (serving outside the state), **government employees posted outside India** and **their spouses are entitled to vote only by post**.
- In other words, they can't vote in person. **Voters under preventive detention can also vote only by post**.
- **Special voters such as the President of India**, Vice President, Governors, Union Cabinet ministers, Speaker of the House and government officers on poll duty **have the option to vote by post. But they have to apply through a prescribed form to avail this facility**.

- **There is also a facility for absentee voters to vote through PBs. These voters are those who are unable to physically cast their vote due to their service conditions.**
- For instance, **railway employees** who are posted outside their home state are counted as absentee voters.
- **In 2020, the Election Commission (EC) introduced the facility of PBs for senior citizens, people with disabilities (PwD) and those under Covid-19 quarantine.**

How are voters supposed to vote using postal ballots?

- **The Returning Officer (RO) is supposed to print ballot papers within 24 hours of the last date of nomination withdrawal** and dispatch them within a day, to ensure that voters have enough time to receive the ballots, cast their vote and return the ballots to the RO on time.
- **The voters are supposed to mark their preference such that** “the intention of the voter to vote for a particular candidate is clear beyond any reasonable doubt.” **Unclear or improper marking can lead to the PB getting rejected.**
- **Alongside the ballot, the envelope containing the PB also contains a declaration by the voter in Form 13-A** which must be appropriately filled for the vote to count with attestation from an official that marks the eligibility of the voter to avail this facility.

How are postal ballots counted?

- According to EC rules, **All PBs received by the RO up to the hour fixed for commencement of counting must be counted.** Thus even if one’s PB arrives at the office of the RO on the morning of counting, it can still be counted as long as it reaches before the commencement of counting itself.

- **Each counting table receives not more than 500 ballots in each round** with up to four tables dedicated for calculating just PBs.
- On a counting table, an Assistant Returning Officer (ARO), one counting supervisor, two counting assistants and a micro-observer are present.
- Persons involved in postal ballot counting are specifically trained about all aspects of postal ballot voting. Each table also has one **counting agent representing each candidate.**
- **In the process of counting, first the declaration of each voter is checked for any issues.**
- All legitimate declarations are then collected and sealed before the ballots themselves are opened. This is done to maintain the secrecy of the vote, a cornerstone of our democracy. After that the ballots are opened and tallied.
- **The total number of postal votes received by each candidate so counted will be entered in the result sheet in Form 20** and announced for the information of the candidates/election agents/counting agents.

- **Candidates are to know exactly how many PBs were received and how many PBs voted for them.**
- All PBs that are rejected at the counting tables are reverified personally by the RO before being set aside. If the RO finds any of these rejected PBs fit to be counted, they are then counted as valid.

A PB paper will be rejected on the following grounds:

- If no vote is recorded thereon;
- If votes are given on it in favour of more than one candidate;
- If it is a spurious ballot paper;
- If it has been so damaged or mutilated that its identity as genuine ballot paper cannot be established;

- If it is not returned in the appropriate cover/envelope that was sent to the voter by the RO
- If the mark indicating the vote is made in such a way that it is doubtful to make out the candidate to whom the vote has been given; or
- If it bears any mark or writing by which the voter can be identified.

What happens at the end of counting?

- At the end of counting, all rejected and valid PBs are separately bundled away and packed in sealed packets by the RO. This is done to ensure that these PBs are available for a recount.
- According to EC rules, **in case the victory margin is less than total number of postal ballots received then there should be a mandatory re-verification of all postal ballots.**
- In the presence of Observer and the RO all the postal ballots rejected as invalid as well as the postal votes counted in favour of each and every candidate shall once again be verified and tallied. The Observer and the RO shall record the findings of re-verification and satisfy themselves before finalising the result.
- **The entire proceeding should be video-graphed without compromising the secrecy of the ballot** and the video-cassette/CD should be sealed in a separate envelope for future reference.