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1. Special categories of voters, their voting methods

Introduction

The general rules established for voting under various sections of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RPA) state that all voters must vote in person, at their designated polling station, on the date and hours fixed for the poll and using EVMs.

However, special exceptions are made for certain categories of voters to ensure that everyone gets to exercise their franchise. Here are the alternative methods of voting available, and who all are eligible to avail them.

ALTERNATIVE VOTING METHODS — AND WHO IS ELIGIBLE			
By Post	Facilitation Center	Postal Voting Center	Home/Hospital
Special voters	Voters on election duty	Persons employed in essential services (AVES)*	Senior citizens (AVSC)*
Service voters			Persons with disability (AVPD)*
Electors subjected to preventive detention (also through special messenger)			Persons affected or suspected of having Covid-19 (AVCO)*
<i>*AV refers to 'absentee voters'</i>			

Postal Ballots

'Postal ballot' allows voters who cannot be physically present in polling stations to vote remotely, as specified in Section 60 of the RPA. This method differs from normal voting in three ways:

- Polling takes place outside the polling station;
- It takes place without EVMs (EDC voters are an exception — more on them later);
- Polling takes place before the designated poll date in the constituency.

As per Rule 18 of The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, the following classes of persons are entitled to vote by postal ballot:

1. Special voters: Individuals holding declared office under Section 20(4) of RPA, including the President, Vice President, Governors, Cabinet Ministers, other high-ranking dignitaries, etc. and their spouses.

2. Service voters: Members of the Indian armed forces, paramilitary forces, an armed state police member serving outside their state, or a government employee stationed abroad and their spouses residing with them.

3. Voters on election duty: This includes all Commission's observers, presiding officers, polling officers and agents, police personnel, and public servants assigned official tasks on polling day. Private individuals and non-government staff, such as videographers, control room staff, drivers, conductors, cleaners, helpline staff, etc., are also covered.

4. Electors subjected to preventive detention

5. Absentee voters under Section 60 (c) of RPA, 1951: In 2019, the Election Commission created the 'Absentee Voters' category. This includes senior citizens aged 85+ (AVSC), persons with disabilities having at least 40% disability (AVPD), Covid-19 suspect or affected persons (AVCO), and persons employed in essential services (AVES).

AVES includes officials certified to be on duty on the day of the poll but not on election duty, including railways, telecom, electricity, health, traffic, aviation, fire services, media persons authorised by ECI for poll day coverage, etc.

Those eligible for postal voting must submit a formal application to the Returning Officer within a set timeframe. Service voters and electors under Preventive Detention automatically receive postal ballots. Once issued, these voters cannot vote in person.

In 2016, Rule 23 was amended to introduce the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS) for Service Voters, speeding up the delivery of postal ballots. ETPBS features encrypted ballots sent electronically via a secure portal. While the ballot is transmitted electronically, voters return their completed ballots via post at no cost.

Facilitation centres, Postal voting centres

Rule 18A, introduced in 2022, mandates voters on election duty to vote at designated Facilitation Centers using postal ballots. Previously, these voters could take their ballots home,

which led to the risk of undue influence. These centres are located at training venues and designated offices, and operate before the election. The voting process, which is videotaped, involves casting votes into a steel trunk. After voting, postal ballots are placed in labelled cotton bags and kept in a strong room.

Similarly, an appropriate venue and room for the Postal Voting Centre (PVC) are identified to facilitate voting by absent voters in the Essential Services (AVES) category. These voters may come to get their postal ballots issued and cast a vote on any of the three fixed days from 9 AM to 5 PM.

The contesting candidates are notified about the location and schedules of these centres, and can send observers who are allowed to sign the postal ballot register and receive a copy.

Home Voting

Over 81 lakh 85+ aged voters and 90 lakh PwD voters are registered in the electoral roll nationwide. For absentee voters over 85 (AVSC), PwD (AVPD) and AVCO, Booth Level Officers (BLOs) deliver Form 12D and compulsorily obtain acknowledgements from them. If the elector opts for the Postal Ballot, then the BLO collects the form for home voting within five days of the election's notification.

For home voting, teams consisting of two poll officers, a police security officer, a micro-observer, and a videographer are formed. Voters are notified of visits via SMS, post, or BLO; if a voter is unavailable after two attempts, no further action is taken.

Candidates, their agents, and media personnel are informed of the schedule and can observe the process. All visits are completed the day before the polls.

Voting in a different polling centre

Suppose a person on election duty is deployed in the same constituency where they are enrolled as a voter. In that case, the Returning Officer can issue the applicant an Election Duty Certificate (EDC). This entitles them to vote at a polling station through EVM where they are on duty, which is not the station where they are enrolled as a voter since they are deputed through randomisation. However, if they are on duty in another constituency, they are entitled only to a postal ballot.

Proxy voting

Service voters in the Armed and paramilitary forces can vote either by proxy or postal ballot. Those who choose the proxy voting method are known as 'Classified Service Voters' (CSVs). They must appoint a local resident as their proxy. The proxy votes at the designated polling station and indelible ink is applied to their left middle finger to indicate proxy voting.

Assisted Voting

Suppose an elector is unable to vote due to blindness or other disability. In that case, the Presiding Officer may allow them to bring a companion over 18 into the voting booth to record a vote on their behalf. The indelible ink is applied to the companion's right index finger in such cases.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

2. How close is the World Health Organization to agreeing on pandemic response rules?

Why in News?

Health officials from the 194 member states of the World Health Organization hope next week to complete more than two years of negotiations on new rules for responding to pandemics when they gather in Geneva.

Negotiations are ongoing for two complementary deals that could be formalised at the May 27-June 1 meeting: an update to existing health rules on outbreaks and a new legally-binding treaty to shore up the world's defences against future pathogens after the COVID-19 pandemic killed millions of people.

Some observers say this World Health Assembly, set to be attended by some 100 ministers, is the single most important moment for the WHO since its 1948 creation.



What is the so-called Pandemic Treaty?

The WHO already has binding rules known as the International Health Regulations (2005) which set out countries' obligations where public health events have the potential to cross national borders. These include advising the WHO immediately of a health emergency and measures on trade and travel.

Adopted after the 2002/3 SARS outbreak, these regulations are still seen as functional for regional epidemics such as Ebola but inadequate for a global pandemic.

Much of the impetus for a separate treaty comes from a desire to address the COVID-era shortcomings of the current system, chiefly avoiding a repeat of the "vaccine apartheid" denounced repeatedly by Tedros, and ensuring faster, more transparent information sharing and cooperation.

One of the most important and fiercely debated sections of the treaty, Article 12, envisages reserving around 20% of tests, treatments and vaccines for the WHO to distribute to poorer countries during emergencies although the exact portion is still contested, negotiators say.

It would be only the second such health accord after the 2003 Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, a treaty which aims to reduce smoking via taxation and rules on labelling and advertising.

How will global health rules change?

Updates to the IHR rules include a new alerts system for communicating different risk assessments for future outbreaks, following criticism that cumbersome existing rules slowed the global response to the COVID-19 emergency.

Currently, the WHO has only one level of emergency – a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) – whereas the new system envisages an intermediary stage called an “early action alert”.

Negotiators are also considering a “pandemic emergency” for the most serious public health threats, addressing a gap in its current system which does not use the term pandemic at all. Other revisions include attempts to bolster states’ obligations, in one case strengthening language on their duties to inform the WHO on public health events from “may” to “should”.

How do countries view the pact?

Negotiations have been characterised by major rifts between wealthy and poorer countries’.

Besides the sharing of drugs and vaccines, one of the most contested aspects is financing, including whether to set up a dedicated fund or draw on existing resources, such as the World Bank’s \$1 billion pandemic fund.

Another factor constraining negotiators has been political pressure over the treaty, particularly by right-wing groups and politicians who say it threatens sovereignty, which the WHO strongly denies.

What happens next?

The new IHR rules and the pandemic accord are designed to complement each other and views vary over whether one could exist without the other. Sources say the IHR talks are more advanced and more likely to pass, with negotiations close to completion.

However, two Western diplomats expressed fears that those seeking big concessions on the pandemic treaty will hold the IHR talks “hostage”.

Unlike the treaty, which would require ratification to take effect, possibly taking years, the IHR changes take effect automatically after 12 months unless countries opt out.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

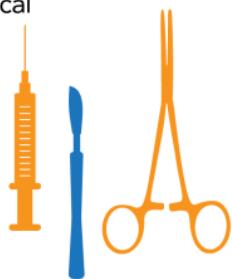
3. Why is Ethylene Oxide used for sterilisation of Indian spices? What is the method that the EU prefers?

Why in News?

Last month, Hong Kong and Singapore recalled certain spice mix products of the MDH and Everest Group allegedly over the presence of a higher than prescribed level of the sterilising agent Ethylene Oxide (ETO). The Indian authorities have now initiated several measures to ensure that Indian spices comply with food safety standards of the importing countries.

What is ethylene oxide?

Ethylene oxide is a flammable gas produced by industry. Ethylene oxide is used to make other chemicals and is used to sterilize medical supplies and food products like spices.



ATSDR Toxicological Profile for Ethylene Oxide

Health effects of exposure



Cancer



Impacts on the nervous system



Impacts on kidney function

ATSDR Toxicological Profile for Ethylene Oxide

Ethylene oxide releases in TRI

The **chemical manufacturing** sector reports the most releases.

Most ethylene oxide is released **to air**.



U.S. EPA TRI, Reporting Year 2022

Where does contamination occur?

India does not use ETO as a pesticide but only as a sterilising agent to reduce microbial load in finished (spice) goods. Most of the agro products, including spices, are heaped in mandies (auction yards for farmers) where they are contaminated by human, bird, reptile and insect contact. Many of the large factories receive material from the mandies, which is then fed on automated lines. It leaves them with high microbial levels and forces them to opt for ETO sterilisation.

How big are Indian spice exports?

A quick export estimate data available with the Spices Board India shows that India enjoys a significant share in the global market for spices and spice products. In 2023-2024, India exported spices worth \$4.4 billion (nearly 14 lakh tonnes), which is 12.3% higher than the financial year 2022-2023. China, Bangladesh, west Asian countries and the U.S. are important markets for Indian spices.

What has been impact of the recall?

An office bearer of the Federation of Indian Spice Stakeholders pointed out that Singapore and Hong Kong had not banned the Indian products, but only recalled them. Exports have resumed to these countries and hence there may not be much impact in the coming months because of this issue. India's share in total spice production globally is about 70%.

Countries have different standards for ETO and maximum (pesticide) residue levels (MRL). The European Union has stringent norms for both ETO and MRLs while Japan largely sources only organic products. The industry has been talking to the Indian government demanding discussions with the EU to relax the norms in order to boost Indian spice exports to the EU market.

What has the Spices Board done?

Following the recall by Hong Kong and Singapore, the Spices Board issued a detailed protocol to all manufacturing exporters to prevent ETO contamination. The Board also said it was starting mandatory testing of spice consignments to Singapore and Hong Kong for ETO. It has also taken up with the international food standards body the need for ETO usage limit as it varies for each country.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Hindu

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