

Standing Committee Report Summary

Proxy and Postal Voting by Defence Services Personnel

- The Standing Committee on Defence (Chairperson: Major General BC Khanduri (Retd.)) submitted its report on 'Proxy and Postal Voting by Defence Services Personnel in General Elections- An Evaluation' on December 8, 2016.
- Members of the armed forces may vote either: (i) at their native place even though they are not ordinarily resident there as 'service voters', or (ii) at their place of posting as 'general voters'. If the person chooses to vote at his native place, he may do so through postal ballot or a proxy appointed by him. However, the Committee noted that about 30 lakh defence service personnel and their family members are unable to exercise their right to vote because of complicated procedures involved in proxy and postal voting. In light of this, the Committee made the following recommendations.
- **Criteria for voting in place of posting:** The Election Commission has laid down some conditions that must be satisfied for defence personnel to vote at their place of posting. This includes a minimum tenure of posting of 3 years at the concerned place. The Committee noted that the Supreme Court is inquiring into feasibility of removing or reducing this condition, and desired to be apprised of the progress of the case periodically.
- The Committee observed that while wives of defence personnel may be registered as voters at the place of posting (if residing with husband), the same benefit is not extended to husbands of the personnel. It recommended that husbands may be registered as voters in the place of posting as well.
- **Proxy voting:** The procedure for proxy voting in the native place requires the service voter to complete an application form appointing his proxy, and have it verified by the commanding officer of his unit. This form must be sent to the proxy for his signature, and attestation by a first class magistrate. It may be then delivered to the Returning Officer conducting the election in the concerned constituency. The Committee observed that this process is taxing for the service voter, his proxy and the Returning Officers. It also makes it difficult to maintain the confidentiality of choice of the service voter. Therefore, it recommended that an alternative to the system of proxy voting be developed.
- **Postal ballot:** The Committee noted that approximately 90% of defence personnel are unable to exercise their right to vote because of inadequacies in the postal ballot system. There is a 14-day time limit for dispatching and returning the postal ballot papers. Either the personnel do not receive their ballot papers on time, or it becomes difficult to send back the papers within the time limit. It was recommended that the postal ballot system be immediately reformed.
 - This may be done in several ways. First, the dispatch of postal ballots could be done from a centralised location, instead of through the Returning Officers of the constituencies. Second, the printing of postal ballot papers may be completed within 24 hours of the list of contesting candidates being finalised. Third, electoral practices of countries like Australia, Brazil, UK, USA, Switzerland, may be studied so that advanced technology or internet voting may be used for postal balloting. Fourth, the Election Commission must do away with the practice of counting the postal ballots before the votes are cast through the electronic voting machines.
 - **Electronic voting:** The Committee noted that the central government issued a notification in 2016 to allow service voters to have their ballot papers transmitted through electronic means instead of regular post. In this context, it recommended that: (i) standard operating procedures for online registration and voting be finalised, (ii) unique service numbers be granted to service voters to enable effective voting online, and (iii) size of e-postal ballot files be reduced to permit easy downloading even in areas with slow internet speeds.
 - **Records of service voters:** The Committee observed that details of the number of defence personnel who did not cast votes in the elections, and reasons for the same have not been maintained. It recommended that a mechanism be devised to know number of service votes received, counted, invalidated and reasons behind invalidation of votes. This data would facilitate maximum participation by the defence services in the elections.
 - **Linking with aadhar number:** The Committee recommended that every voter, whether general or service, be linked with his aadhar number. This would enable the authentication of service voters through measures such as one-time passwords as used by banks for financial transactions.

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