

First General Elections

With the Constitution coming into force in 1950, India no longer had a dominion status and could sever any remaining links with Britain; it was a sovereign democratic republic. The provisions of the Constitution relating to citizenship and Article 324 (the Election Commission) were brought into force on November 26, 1949, while the rest of the Constitution came into force on January 26, 1950. The next year, the government wanted to go in for general elections to constitute the House of the People—the Lok Sabha—as provided for in the Constitution.

The founding fathers of the Indian Constitution incorporated certain aspects of the electoral procedure in the Constitution itself (Part XV, Articles 324 to 329).

Groundwork for the Elections

■ The Election Commission

The office of the Election Commission had been set up in a small way on January 25, 1950. The first Chief Election Commissioner of India was Sukumar Sen, an ICS officer, who assumed office on March 21, 1950. Although the Constitution provides for the appointment of other members of the Election Commission as and when necessary, for long after India became a republic the commission was a single-member one.

The Election Commission of India is a permanent constitutional body, established in accordance with the Constitution. It has been made independent of the government of the day. Under Article 324, the Election Commission of India has been vested with the power of the superintendence, direction and control of the entire process for conduct of elections to Parliament and legislature of every state and to the offices of President and Vice-President of India. The Election Commission had to do a lot of ground work before the first polls were held.

■ Legislation for Polls

Two major measures were passed by Parliament which provided the detailed law under which elections were to be held. The first of these measures was the Representation of the People Act, 1950, which provided for the qualifications of voters and matters connected with the preparation and publication of electoral rolls. It also allocated the number of seats in the House of the People to the several states and fixed the number of seats in each state legislature. The second legislation was the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which laid down other provisions relating to qualifications and disqualifications of members, the conduct of elections, poll expenses, the poll itself, counting of votes, etc.

It was only after these laws were passed that the electoral machinery could be put in place. So, though the government was in a hurry to hold the elections as early as 1950 and then by the spring of 1951, the first phase of the elections could be held only from October 15, 1951.

Of the 489 seats in the House of the People to be filled by election, 72 seats were reserved for candidates belonging to the Scheduled Castes, and 26 for candidates belonging to the Scheduled Tribes.

The total number of seats in the Legislative Assemblies of the states was 3,283. Out of these, 477 seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes, and 192 for the Scheduled Tribes.

Independent India Goes to the Polls for the First Time

The elections were held based on universal adult franchise, with all those twenty-one years of age or older having the right to vote. The total number of voters enrolled in the whole of India (excluding Jammu and Kashmir) was 17,32,13,635 (roughly more than 173 million). Of these, approximately 45 per cent were women voters. The total population of India (excluding Jammu and Kashmir) according to the 1951 census was 35,66,91,760. As much as 49 per cent of the total population was thus enrolled as voters.

■ Challenges

Most of the voters were poor, illiterate, and came from rural areas, and had no experience of elections. There was much scepticism about such an electorate being able to exercise its right to vote in a politically mature and responsible manner. The electoral exercise was described by some as ‘a leap in the dark’ and by others as ‘fantastic’ and as ‘an act of faith’ before the elections took place.

The Election Commission faced many challenges. There was a house-to-house survey to register the voters. Many eligible voters could not be included in the electoral rolls despite much effort on the part of the Election Commission because of (i) ignorance and apathy of the common voter, (ii) lack of adequate organisation and experience on the part of the political parties, and (iii) inexperience and poor organisation of the governmental machinery in some of the states.

According to the report by Sukumar Sen after the elections were over, a large number of women voters had been enrolled in some states not by their own names but by the description of the relationship they bore to their male relations, e.g., as the mother of so and so or the wife of so and so; this was because local custom dictated that women

do not disclose their proper names to strangers. The Election Commission had to issue firm instructions that, as the name of an elector was an essential part of his or her identity, the correct name must be included in the electoral rolls and that no elector should be enrolled unless sufficient particulars, including the name, were given. If a woman did not give her proper name, she was not to be registered as a voter. As a result, the names of nearly two to three million out of a total of nearly 80 million women voters in the country were unable to be registered as they failed to disclose their proper names, and these women could not exercise their vote. Most of these women, says the report, were from the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Bharat, Rajasthan and Vindhya Pradesh.

The Election Commission also faced a major problem with regard to the displaced persons (who had migrated from Pakistan in the wake of partition) in West Bengal, Punjab, Delhi and, to some extent, in Assam. These migrants constituted a considerable floating population, and it was very difficult to register those of them that were eligible for registration under the law.

Political parties in a mature democracy participate in all stages of the process of elections. The parties could be of great help in the preparation of electoral rolls. However, India was a nascent democracy and political parties lacked experience; they took little interest in doing their bit. As it was, the huge task of preparing the electoral rolls in a country of some 173 million voters had to be borne almost entirely by the governmental machinery in the states acting under the directions of the Election Commission.

With over 70 per cent of the voters being illiterate, it was necessary for candidates to be identified by symbols. The Election Commission had to allot a symbol to each major party and independent candidate. At the time of allotment of symbols the political parties became more active. Indeed, according to the Sen report, a remarkable feature of the increasing tempo was the formation of new political parties

all over the country, some of them ultimately proving to be a mushroom growth. There were as many as 178 parties but most of these parties virtually disappeared after the elections, with many of their candidates forfeiting their deposits.

The symbols were painted on the ballot-boxes (this was later changed to symbols on the ballot papers). "A voter had to simply insert the ballot paper given to him in the ballot box of the candidate of his choice in the voting compartment," writes former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi in his book, *An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian Election*. The ballot was secret.

■ Parties in the Fray for the Lok Sabha

Though it was generally accepted that the Congress had the largest following, various other political strands in India were also beginning to take shape. Just before the first elections, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee (industries minister under Nehru) broke away to set up the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (a proto-BJP) in October 1951. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar revived the Scheduled Castes Federation (which was later named the Republican Party). Another high-profile Congress leader, J. B. (Acharya) Kripalani, founded the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party. Ram Manohar Lohia and Jaya Prakash Narayan, were the forces behind the Socialist Party. And the communists (then united), having just abandoned an armed struggle in Telangana, too contested.

There were 53 political parties participating in the first general elections for the Lok Sabha seats. These included the 14 national parties, according to the report by the Election Commission of India. Besides, there were the independents. There were a total number of 1,874 candidates, including 533 independents.

The national parties were:

1. All India Bhartiya Jan Sangh (BJS)
2. Bolshevik Party of India (BPI)
3. Communist Party of India (CPI)

4. Forward Bloc (Marxist Group) FBL (MG)
5. Forward Bloc (Ruikar Group) FBL (RG)
6. Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (HMS)
7. Indian National Congress (INC)
8. Krishikar Lok Party (KLP)
9. Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP)
10. Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI)
11. Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad (RRP)
12. Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)
13. All India Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF)
14. Socialist Party (SP)

■ Conduct of Elections

In the first general elections of the nation, there were three types of constituencies: 314 with single seats, 86 with two seats and one with three seats. The total seats thus were 489 from 401 constituencies.

There were over 224,000 polling booths, one for almost every 1000 voters, and these were equipped with over 2 million steel ballot-boxes, one box for every candidate. About a million officials supervised the conduct of the polls.

Indelible ink was introduced as a precautionary step: a mark was put on the voter's finger as he/she went in to vote so as to prevent impersonation. (The practice continues to this day.)

The first-past-the-post system was the mode, so of the many candidates, whoever got the plurality or the largest number of votes would be elected; the winning candidate did not need to have a majority.

The voter turnout for the elections was 45.7 per cent. The people demonstrated their ability to vote with knowledge even though the majority of them were illiterate. The number of invalid votes was as low as 3 to 4 per cent. The participation of women was significant with some 40 per cent of the eligible women voters exercising their vote.

■ Results

Lok Sabha

The Indian National Congress contested 472 seats and won 364, a stupendous majority of the seats to the Lok Sabha. The CPI won 16 and the Socialist Party won 12 – the only other parties to get two-digit number of seats. The KMPP won 9 seats. The BJS won 3 seats. The independents got the highest number of seats after the Congress.

The Congress polled close to 45 per cent of the total vote. The CPI got about 3.29 per cent votes. The Socialist Party got 10.59 per cent votes.

First General Elections: Winners

Winning Parties	Percentage of Votes	Seats
Indian National Congress (INC)	44.99	364
Communist Party of India (CPI)	3.29	16
Socialist Party	10.59	12
Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP)	5.79	9
Peoples Democratic Front (PDF)	1.29	7
Ganatantra Parishad	0.91	6
Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha	0.95	4
Shiromani Akali Dal	0.99	4
Tamil Nadu Toilers Party	0.84	4
Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad	1.97	3
Bharatiya Jana Sangh	3.06	3
Revolutionary Socialist Party	0.44	3
Commonwealth Party	0.31	3
Jharkhand Party	0.71	3
Scheduled Caste Federation	2.38	2
Lok Sevak Sangh	0.29	2
Peasants and Workers Party of India	0.94	2
Forward Bloc (Marxist Group)	0.91	1
Krishikar Lok Party	1.41	1
Chhota Nagpur Santhal Parganas Janta Party	0.22	1
Madras State Muslim League Party	0.08	1
Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress Party	0.11	1
Independents	15.9	37
Anglo-Indians (Nominated)		2

Some prominent winners were: Gulzari Lal Nanda and Lal Bahadur Shastri who were to be future prime ministers; Delhi's first chief minister to be, Chaudhry Brahm Prakash; Humayun Kabir, A.K. Gopalan, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, K.D. Malviya and Subhadra Joshi.

Dr B. R. Ambedkar was defeated in the Bombay (North Central), which was a reserved constituency, as a candidate of the Scheduled Castes Federation by his little-known former assistant and Congress candidate, Narayan Sadoba Kajrolkar. (Dr Ambedkar later entered Parliament as a Rajya Sabha member.)

Acharya Kripalani as the KMPP candidate lost from Faizabad in UP, but his wife Sucheta Kripalani defeated the Congress candidate, Manmohini Sahgal, in Delhi.

After the votes were counted and results declared, the first Lok Sabha or the House of the People was constituted by the Election Commission on April 2, 1952. Until this point, the Indian Constituent Assembly had served as an interim legislature.

The Speaker of the first Lok Sabha was Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar.

Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime minister after the general elections.

State Legislatures

In the state legislature elections, too, the Indian National Congress swept the polls. The party won 2,248 seats on the whole. It formed the government in all the states, though it did not get the majority on its own in four states, namely, Madras, Travancore-Cochin, Orissa and PEPSU.