

**REVISED GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCT OF GENERAL/ BYE ELECTIONS TO
THE LOCAL BODIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION
(In modification of earlier guidelines vide No. 1393(4)-SEC/1A-8/2020 dated 30.12.2021)**

Whereas, the Commission, cognizant of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, has issued COVID guidelines as referred to above, prescribing arrangements at different stages of election process including those at Polling Stations for voters, for election officials including Polling Personnel, for candidates, agents as well as for political campaign;

Whereas, this guideline was more or less the same that was applied in the recently held General Elections to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation;

Whereas, after a review of the current situation of COVID-19 pandemic and the concerns due to high rate of infectivity and advent of multiple cases of a new COVID-19 variant “Omicron”, on due consultation with the State machinery and on due consideration on the latest guidelines issued by the Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal vide No. 753/XVII-ISS/2M-22/2020 dated 02.01.2022 containing the recommendations of the West Bengal State Disaster Management Authority the Commission has decided to revise the earlier guidelines as referred to above;

Accordingly, the following guidelines are to be strictly followed by all concerned:

I. GENERAL GUIDELINES TO BE FOLLOWED DURING ENTIRE ELECTION PROCESSES FOR ALL PERSONS:

1. Every person shall wear face mask during every election related activity.
2. Everyone should compulsorily undergo thermal scanning and use sanitizer at the entry of hall, room and premises used for election related activities.
3. If one fails in thermal scanning, his entry shall not be allowed in the hall, room and premises used for election related activities.
4. Social distance to be maintained as per COVID-19 guidelines of the State Government.

5. As far as practicable, large halls should be identified and utilized to ensure social distancing norms.
6. All polling personnel and election officials including the private persons engaged in election duty shall have to be compulsorily **double vaccinated**.
7. Candidate/ election agent/ polling agent/ counting agent/ driver etc., whoever is coming in contact with the public or election officials may be allowed to perform their respective functions on the production of a Final Certificate for COVID-19 Vaccination preferably, or at least, a Provisional Certificate for Vaccination generated after receiving 1st dose of COVID-19 Vaccine or a negative COVID-19 test report.
8. Adequate number of vehicles shall be mobilised for movement of polling personnel, security personnel to ensure compliance of COVID-19 guidelines.

II. NODAL HEALTH OFFICER:

A **Nodal Health Officer** shall be designated for the District/ Municipal Body concerned to oversee COVID-19 related arrangements and preventive measures during the entire election process.

III. ELECTION STORE ROOMS:

Election materials like forms and covers etc., shall be kept in disinfected rooms. Only designated officials shall be permitted to enter the store room and they shall follow all COVID-19 precautionary measures.

IV. PREPARING EVMs/ BALLOT BOXES:

1. During the entire exercise the officials and candidates present shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves.

2. The operations should be done in small groups, as far as practicable, to avoid gathering of people.
3. The storage rooms for EVMs/ Ballot Boxes should be properly sanitized.
4. **EVMs:** FLC, First & Second randomization and commissioning of EVMs shall be done in large halls. During the entire exercise the officials, candidates and representatives of political parties present shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves. Hand sanitizer, thermal gun should be used and Do's & Don'ts posters for COVID-19 should be displayed at the venue. Number of days of the activity may be increased so as to do the exercise in small groups.
5. **Ballot box checking/ repairing:** During the entire exercise the officials present shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves. Hand sanitizer, thermal gun should be used and Do's & Don'ts posters for COVID-19 should be displayed at the venue. Number of days of the activity may be increased so as to do the exercise in small groups.

V. NOMINATION PROCESS:

1. During the entire exercise the officials and candidates present shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves.
2. The operations should be done in small groups, as far as practicable, to avoid gathering of people.
3. The room of the RO/ ARO receiving the nominations should be sufficiently spacious so as to perform the functions of nomination, scrutiny and symbol allocation following social distancing norms.

4. Usually, nominations for all constituencies i.e. Wards within a Municipality are received in a hall. This time, to avoid gathering, nomination venues should be scattered as far as practicable within the same premises.
5. Nomination form and format for affidavit will also be available online on the website of the State Election Commission, which can be downloaded, printed and used.
6. While filing nominations, two persons for each candidate may be allowed to enter the room of the Returning Officer maintaining proper social distance. This may include the candidate, one proposer or another person in lieu of either the candidate or the proposer.
7. A COVID-19 positive patient shall submit nominations through his proposer.
8. No nomination procession shall be permitted. Only two vehicles shall be allowed within a periphery of 100 metres of the Office of the RO/ nomination venue.

VI. SCRUTINY OF NOMINATIONS AND ALLOTMENT OF SYMBOLS:

1. During the entire exercise the officials and candidates present shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves.
2. As per Section 43(1) of West Bengal Municipal Elections Act, 1994, the candidate, one of his proposer(s), his election agent and one other person duly authorised in writing by the candidate are allowed to attend scrutiny. However, to avoid gathering following COVID guidelines, the Commission has decided that any two of the four persons mentioned above may remain present during scrutiny.
3. The scrutiny should be scattered, as far as possible, to avoid gathering; if two days are available in the schedule for scrutiny, it should be scattered to both the days.

4. If any of the four persons mentioned above is a COVID-19 positive patient, he may not attend scrutiny. Any two of the four, who are not infected with COVID-19, may attend.
5. During the process of allotment of symbols, only the candidate or his election agent may be present.

VII. CAMPAIGN BY CANDIDATES AND POLITICAL PARTIES:

1. To avoid large gatherings, emphasis should be given by all political parties and candidates to use digital platform as medium for campaign rather than holding meetings and rallies, keeping in mind threats caused by COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Street corner meetings should be avoided.
3. No road show or padayatra shall be permissible.
4. No cycle/ bike/ vehicle rally shall be permissible.
5. House to house visit by the candidates and the representatives of political parties may be done with a maximum number of five persons including the candidate, excluding security personnel, following COVID-19 protocols.
6. For meetings, the DEO shall identify some big grounds well in advance. There should be separate exit and entry routes to the ground. Only these ground should be allowed for holding meetings. However, the DEO should, as far as practicable, give all the political parties or candidates a fair chance to hold such meetings. The political parties or candidates holding such meetings should ensure that there is no overcrowding and everyone present wears mask and other COVID-19 protocols, viz., thermal scanning, use of sanitizers should be maintained. **In no case such meetings should be attended by more than 500 persons.**
7. **Conferences shall accommodate not more than 200 persons at a time or 50% of seating capacity of the hall, whichever is lower.**

8. **Over and above meetings should strictly be in compliance with the guidelines issued by the State Government on 02.01.2022 as referred to above.**
9. It shall be the responsibility of the organisers of public meetings, rallies, etc. to provide masks and sanitizers to every person attending these meetings, rallies, etc. at their cost which shall be added and counted within limits of prescribed expenditure.
10. **Permission for road show, cycle/ bike/ vehicle rally, if granted already, stands withdrawn. Permission for public meeting, if granted already, stands modified to the extent above at 6 & 7.**
11. A candidate, who has been found COVID-19 positive, should restrict himself to electronic medium, in campaign related activities. Physical presence of such candidate in house to house visits and in meetings must be avoided.
12. No car or bike rally shall be allowed. Campaigns in single vehicle using tableau, banners, posters etc. with strict adherence to COVID-19 norms will however be permitted.
13. No rallies, public meetings, street plays, etc. shall be allowed on any day during the days of the campaign period between **08.00 pm** and **09.00 am** and there shall be no campaign from **72 hours** before the end of poll.
14. In case political parties/ candidates do not abide by the laid down COVID-19 protocols during campaign, necessary action under pandemic act etc. will be initiated immediately by the district authorities and their permission for further campaigns, even if granted previously, shall also be cancelled.

VIII. TRAINING OF POLLING & COUNTING PERSONNEL:

1. As far as practicable, training of election and counting officials will be organized in decentralized manner in small groups at large halls, thereby scattering training dates and venues. Multimedia projector, monitor etc. should be used in trainings.

2. Training for election officials and counting officials may be organized through online mode, as far as practicable. Electronic media should be used for circulating training videos, texts, question papers for self-assessment etc. Printed manuals may be sent to their work places beforehand.
3. Communications like notices, appointment letter etc. may be done through electronic mail.
4. Election allowances should be transmitted electronically.
5. Sufficient number of Polling/ Counting/ Poll related staff shall also be kept in reserve by DMEO/ MRO, to replace any polling personnel, who may display COVID-19 symptoms.

IX. BALLOT PAPER PRINTING:

1. During the entire exercise the officials present shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves. Hand sanitizer & thermal gun should be used and Do's & Don'ts posters for COVID-19 should be displayed at the printing venue.
2. Number of days of the activity may be increased so that the exercise is done in small groups.
3. Printing press should be so chosen so that sufficient workspace within the press is ensured.

X. DISTRIBUTION CENTRE:

1. During the whole process, all present in the venue shall compulsorily follow the COVID-19 guidelines of maintaining social distancing, wearing mask and hand gloves. Hand sanitizer & thermal gun should be used and Do's & Don'ts posters for COVID-19 should be displayed at the venue.

2. Number of counters should be increased with demarcation for keeping mutual distance in queue.
3. As far as practicable, there should be provision of large space for checking of materials by polling personnel.
4. On arrival of the polling officials at the distribution centre mandatory thermal check up shall be conducted and arrangements for hand sanitization shall be kept. Only after ensuring that there are no apparent COVID-19 symptoms, they shall be allowed inside the distribution centre. The assistance of Health Department officials may be availed for this purpose.
5. Polling parties shall travel only in the vehicles assigned to them. Care shall be taken not to overcrowd any vehicle.
6. There should be regular announcements for maintaining the COVID-19 protocol.
7. Prior staggered time slots shall be allocated to the polling teams for distribution/ collection of election material to avoid huge assemblage at one point of time.
8. **Additional items in polling materials:** A COVID kit shall be given to the polling team in addition to other prescribed items.

XI. POLLING STATION ARRANGEMENTS:

1. There shall be mandatory sanitization of all Polling Stations, preferably, a day before the poll, i.e., the day when polling parties reach there.
2. Wearing Face Masks is compulsory for every person entering the polling premises.
3. There shall be thermal scanning and hand sanitization of all persons entering the polling premises. Assistance of Para Medical staff, Asha workers etc. may be taken for this job.
4. If body temperature of an elector is above the set norms of the Health Department at first reading, it will be checked again and if the temperature persists, he shall not be allowed entry into the premises at that point of time. Then the elector shall be

provided with a specified token and will be asked to come for voting at the last hour of poll. At the last hour of poll, such electors shall be facilitated to voting, strictly following COVID-19 related preventive measures.

5. Similar arrangements for thermal checking of polling agents will be put in place. If, any polling agent is found to have temperature above the prescribed limit, he shall not be allowed inside. In that case, his reliever will be allowed as replacement.
6. Help Desk is to be set up for distribution of token to such voters on first come first basis in order to ensure that such voters do not have to linger in the queue.
7. Demarcations will be made for keeping mutual distance in queue.
8. There shall be a prominent display of Do's & Don'ts poster for COVID-19 just outside the entry gate to the polling station.
9. Sitting arrangements in polling station for the polling personnel and polling agents shall be made following the norms of social distancing.
10. During the process of identification of voter, the voters will require to lower the face mask temporarily for identification.
11. At any given time, only one voter shall be allowed to stand in front of each polling officer maintaining social distance.
12. Separate sticks will be used for administering indelible ink to each voter to avoid contamination.
13. Hand gloves for one hand shall be provided to the voter, for signing on the voter register and pressing button of EVM for voting. There shall be proper system for disposal of these gloves within or just outside the premises.
14. COVID-19 patients who are quarantined will be allowed to cast their vote at the last hour of the poll day at their respective Polling Stations, under the supervision of health authorities, strictly following COVID-19 related preventive measures. The

PPE kits provided will be used by the polling officer for this. Sector Officers shall coordinate this in their allocated polling stations.

15. In case of those voters who are residing in the area notified as containment zone, guidelines shall be issued separately.
16. For distribution of unofficial identity slips to voters, the candidate, may identify a separate place in advance, which will be beyond 200 meters of the polling station. These booths will have one table and two chairs with not more than 2 persons manning such booths at a time. The persons distributing identity slips shall take all necessary COVID-19 precautions and there should be no crowding in front of such booths.

XII. RECEIVING CENTRE:

Similar arrangements as was in case of distribution centre shall have to be made.

XIII. COUNTING OF VOTES:

1. Number of counting tables should be limited to 7 in a counting hall so as to ensure social distancing considering the size of a counting hall. If required, appointment of additional Assistant Returning Officers is to be made.
2. There shall be mandatory sanitization of the counting centres, before and after the counting.
3. Wearing Face Masks is compulsory for every person entering the counting centres.
4. There shall be demarcations at the entry point of a counting centre for keeping mutual distance in queue with increased number of counters.
5. There shall be thermal scanning and hand sanitization of all persons entering the counting centre. Assistance of Para Medical staff, Asha workers etc. may be taken.
6. If body temperature of someone is above the set norms of Health Department, at first reading, it will be checked again and if the temperature persists, he shall not be allowed entry.

7. Where poll was taken using EVM, carrying cases of CUs should be sanitized before placing them on the counting tables. Where poll was taken using ballots, the polled ballot boxes should be sanitized before placing them on the counting tables.
8. There shall be a prominent display of Do's & Don'ts poster for COVID-19 just outside the entry gate to the counting centre and the counting halls.
9. The sitting arrangements for each counting personnel and counting agents shall be segregated following COVID-19 protocol.
10. Use of gloves for the officials is mandatory.
11. Those who do not follow the safety instructions shall be sent outside the counting centre immediately by the Returning Officer or the Assistant Returning Officer.
12. Social distancing and other COVID safety protocols shall be strictly adhered to at all times during counting. Appropriate measures shall be taken to prevent crowding.

XIV. DISPOSAL OF COVID-19 SAFETY EQUIPMENTS:

When poll at a polling station is complete, COVID-19 safety equipment like hand gloves, masks etc. used by the officials shall be disposed of following norms issued by the Health & Family Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal bearing No. HF/3238/GA/W/152/21 dated 02.12.2021 having the subject - Handling and Disposal of Bio Medical Waste generated in Polling Stations during General Elections to WBLA, 2021. Copy of the order is enclosed for referral.

XV. AREA SPECIFIC PLANS:

Based on these broad guidelines, a detailed COVID-19 related comprehensive plan for a particular District will be prepared well in advance at the District level by the DEO involving the Health & Police Authorities, taking into account the local conditions.