

Original Article

Local Democracy and Political Transformation: A Study of Maharashtra's Local Body Elections (2025–2026)

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Manuscript ID:
RIGJAAR-2026-030230

ISSN: 2998-4459
Volume 3
Issue 2
Pp. 139-141
February 2026

Submitted: 10 Jan. 2026
Revised: 17 Jan. 2026
Accepted: 12 Feb. 2026
Published: 28 Feb. 2026

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://rlgjaar.com>



DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.20351266

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20351266>



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Abstract:

Local body elections play a crucial role in strengthening grassroots democracy in Maharashtra. Following the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, rural and urban local self-government institutions were granted constitutional status, ensuring democratic decentralization. This paper examines the structure, electoral processes, historical evolution, political dynamics, and key challenges of local body elections in Maharashtra. It also highlights women's participation, reservation policies, voter's behavior, and the role of the State Election Commission in conducting free and fair elections. The study emphasizes how these elections contribute to inclusive governance and democratic participation at the grassroots level (Korwale *et al.*, 2021; State Election Commission Maharashtra, 2026).

Keywords: Panchayati Raj, State Election Commission, Political reservation, Women's Participation, Voter Turnout, Political Dynamics

Introduction:

Local body elections represent a fundamental democratic mechanism through which citizens elect representatives to govern at the village, town, and city levels. In India, these institutions operate within the constitutional framework established by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. In Maharashtra, elections are conducted for rural bodies such as Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis, and Zilla Parishads, as well as urban bodies including Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, and Nagar Panchayats.

These institutions are responsible for addressing essential local issues such as water supply, sanitation, infrastructure, healthcare, and development planning. Local body elections strengthen grassroots democracy by encouraging direct participation of citizens, promoting decentralization of power, ensuring inclusive representation through reservation policies, and fostering leadership development at the local level (Avasthi, 1972).

Historical Background



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How to cite this article:

Lade, D. I. (2026). Local Democracy and Political Transformation: A Study of Maharashtra's Local Body Elections (2025–2026). Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 3(2), 139–141. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20351266>

Maharashtra has been a pioneer in implementing the three-tier Panchayati Raj system since 1962. This system was developed following the recommendations of the Vasantao Naik Committee, which was largely influenced by the Balwantrao Mehta model. The institutional framework was established through the Maharashtra Zilla Parishads and Panchayat Samitis Act, 1961, and the Mumbai Gram Panchayat Act, 1958. Before independence, local governance structures were largely administrative in nature. However, post-independence reforms gradually transformed these institutions into democratic bodies. Major milestones include the Community Development Programme (1952), the Balwantrao Mehta Committee (1957), and the Ashok Mehta Committee (1977), all of which contributed to strengthening decentralization. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 marked a turning point by granting constitutional status to rural and urban local bodies, ensuring regular elections, reservation policies, and financial devolution (Korwale *et al.*, 2021).

Evolution of Local Governance in Maharashtra:

The development of local governance in Maharashtra can be divided into rural and urban trajectories. In rural

areas, the introduction of a three-tier structure Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad helped institutionalize decentralized governance. Over time, committees such as the Bongirwar Committee (1970) and the P. B. Patil Committee (1984) recommended strengthening financial and administrative autonomy.

In urban areas, governance evolved from colonial-era legislation such as the Bombay Municipal Corporation Act, 1888, to a more unified system following the 74th Constitutional Amendment. These reforms ensured democratic accountability and enhanced citizen participation in urban governance.

Election Phases in Maharashtra (2025–2026):

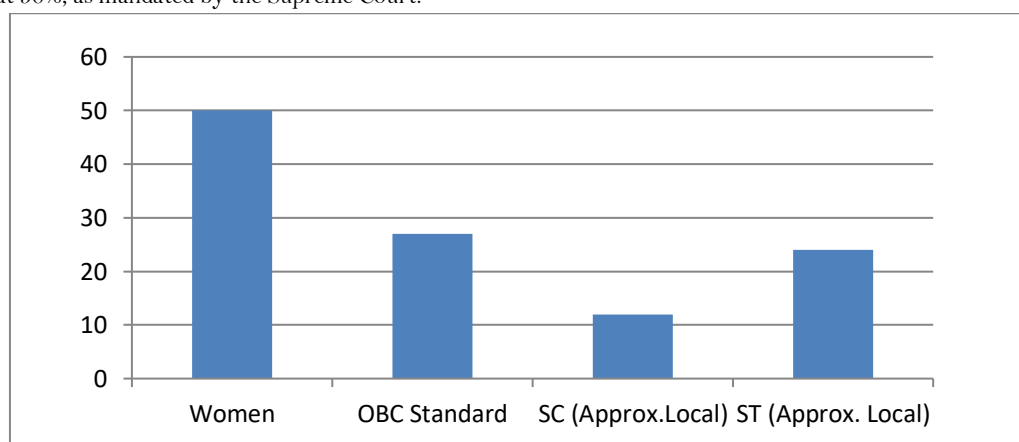
The Maharashtra State Election Commission conducted local body elections in multiple phases between December 2025 and February 2026. These elections included municipal councils, municipal corporations, and rural local bodies.

The phased approach ensured smooth administration and adherence to legal directives issued by the Supreme Court. The elections covered hundreds of urban and rural institutions, reflecting the scale and complexity of democratic governance at the local level (State Election Commission Maharashtra, 2026).

Phases	Type of Local Government Body	Poling Date	Scope	Result Date
Phase-I	Municipal Councils & Nagar Panchayats	December 2, 2025.	246 Municipal Councils and 42 Nagar Panchayats.	December 21, 2025.
Phase-II	Municipal Corporations (including BMC)	January 15, 2026	29 major Municipal Corporations, including Mumbai (BMC), Pune (PMC), Thane (TMC), and Nagpur.	January 16, 2026.
Phase-III	Zilla Parishads & Panchayat Samitis	February 7, 2026.	12 districts And 125 Panchayat Samitis.	February 9, 2026.

Political Reservation System In Maharashtra:

The reservation system in Maharashtra's local body elections is guided by constitutional provisions and judicial limitations. The total reservation for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) is capped at 50%, as mandated by the Supreme Court.



Women's reservation stands at 50% across all local bodies, making Maharashtra one of the leading states in promoting gender representation. This reservation operates horizontally across all categories. SC and ST

reservations are based on population proportions, while OBC reservation is subject to the "triple test" criteria and the overall ceiling (Government of Maharashtra, 2026). Recent developments include the removal of

Muslim reservation and ongoing debates regarding Maratha reservation, which continue to influence the political landscape. However, the interaction between multiple reservation categories has created legal challenges, particularly when total reservations exceed the prescribed limit (Supreme Court Observer, 2026).

Political Dynamics:

Recent local body elections in Maharashtra have witnessed significant political shifts. The BJP-led Mahayuti alliance has emerged as a dominant force, expanding its influence in both rural and urban regions. This marks a departure from the traditional dominance of parties such as the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Caste and community dynamics continue to play a crucial role in electoral outcomes. Political parties often select candidates based on dominant caste groups within specific regions. While development issues are increasingly highlighted, caste-based alignments remain a decisive factor in voting behavior. Additionally, factionalism within political parties and local-level rivalries have led to complex electoral contests, even among alliance partners (Sansad Online, 2026).

Voting Patterns and Voter Turnout:

Voter turnout in Maharashtra varies significantly between rural and urban areas. Urban areas recorded moderate turnout levels, while rural elections witnessed higher participation, reflecting stronger grassroots engagement.

Recent trends indicate a shift from independent candidates to party-based voting. Voters are increasingly aligning with established political parties, leading to more structured electoral competition. Despite this, local issues and leadership continue to influence voter decisions (Wikipedia Contributors, 2026).

Conclusion:

Local self-government elections in Maharashtra demonstrate the evolving nature of grassroots democracy. The expansion of political participation, particularly through women's reservation, has significantly improved representation. However, challenges related to reservation limits, legal disputes, and caste dynamics continue to shape the electoral landscape. The growing dominance of major political alliances, especially the BJP-led coalition, reflects a transformation in the state's political structure. While development and welfare schemes influence voter behavior, caste and community considerations remain deeply embedded in the electoral process.

Overall, local body elections in Maharashtra highlight the complexities of democratic decentralization, balancing inclusivity, governance efficiency, and legal constraints.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all those who contributed directly and indirectly to the completion of

this research paper titled "Local Democracy and Political Transformation: A Study of Maharashtra's Local Body Elections (2025–2026)". Special thanks are extended to the Department of Political Science, Prof. Dr. N. D. Patil Mahavidyalaya, for providing academic guidance and institutional support throughout the study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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