

The Need and Relevance of Electoral Reforms in the Indian Democratic Process

Dr. Ramnath Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Mahatma Gandhi College, Sundarpur,
Darbhanga, India

Abstract: Democracy is the foremost instrument of human emancipation. The freedom fighters of India passionately upheld democratic values and ideals, and all those who sacrificed their lives for the nation's independence were individuals of extraordinary vision and commitment. Continuous electoral reforms in India have played a crucial role in bringing marginalized sections of society—particularly Dalits, backward, and extremely backward communities—into the mainstream of the electoral process. These reforms have strengthened democracy by enhancing popular participation and collective engagement.

The democratic electoral process in India requires constant and progressive reforms. Popular participation and welfare-oriented values are inherently embedded in the very spirit of the electoral system. Therefore, the present article focuses on the democratic process and the necessity of electoral reforms in India. As a parliamentary representative democracy, India has a well-structured electoral system. The responsibility of conducting elections in a free, fair, and transparent manner lies with the Election Commission of India, an independent constitutional body entrusted with the powers of direction, supervision, and control of elections.

Every system of governance adopts some form of electoral process; however, the institution responsible for conducting elections constitutes the foundational pillar of a democratic system. In a democracy, it is not merely the occurrence of elections that matters, but more importantly, the manner in which elections are conducted. The level of trust that participating citizens place in the impartiality, transparency, honesty, and integrity of the electoral authority is of paramount importance. Elections form the backbone of democracy, and in a healthy and progressive democratic system, the right to vote is the most significant fundamental right. The Election Commission plays a vital role in encouraging citizens to exercise their franchise and strengthening democratic participation.

Keywords: Democracy, Elections, Electoral Process, Transparency, Right to Vote.



This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license

Electoral Reforms in Indian Democracy

In Indian democracy, elections constitute the foundation for the protection and promotion of democratic values. The first General Election in India was conducted in 1951–52, and since then, seventeen General Elections have been successfully completed. With every general election, emphasis has been placed on the need for electoral reforms. The framers of the Indian Constitution were fully aware of the significance of elections; therefore, they provided for the establishment of a constitutional body entrusted with the responsibility of conducting elections to the offices of the President, Vice-President, members of the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and State Legislative Assemblies throughout the country. This constitutional body is known as the **Election Commission of India**.

In most countries of the world, elections have been considered relatively less important and are often left to the discretion of the legislature. However, the makers of the Indian Constitution explicitly incorporated the entire framework for the conduct of elections within the Constitution itself. Recognizing the importance of an independent electoral machinery, provisions related to elections and the Election Commission were included in **Part XV of the Constitution (Articles 324 to 329)**. Article 324(1) deals with the composition of the Election Commission and provides for the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner by the President of India.¹ Thus, a comprehensive constitutional framework has been established to ensure free and fair elections.

Despite this, several challenges continue to persist in the contemporary electoral system, making further reforms necessary. Although by 2002 the Election Commission had successfully addressed many major issues, some old problems and several new challenges still remain. Among these, the **influence of money power in elections** has emerged as the most serious concern.

Role of Election Commissioner T. N. Seshan

By the early 1990s, electoral malpractices such as excessive noise pollution, misuse of money power, muscle power, and abuse of official machinery were increasing rapidly. The appointment of **Shri T. N. Seshan as Chief Election Commissioner in 1991** marked a decisive turning point in India's electoral history. Through strict enforcement measures, he succeeded in restoring discipline and credibility to the electoral process. He identified more than one hundred irregularities and initiated prompt corrective actions.

Under his leadership, significant reforms were implemented, including the strict enforcement of the **Model Code of Conduct**, introduction of **voter identity cards**, imposition of **limits on election expenditure**, and stringent action against practices such as voter intimidation, bribery, distribution of liquor, use of loudspeakers, delivery of provocative speeches at religious places, misuse of government vehicles and machinery, and promotion of communal violence.

To prevent the entry of criminal elements into politics, the Election Commission, with the support of the Supreme Court, introduced a provision in 2003 requiring all candidates contesting Lok Sabha and Assembly elections to submit affidavits at the time of nomination disclosing details related to education, assets, liabilities, and criminal records. However, this measure could not fully curb the influence of criminal elements in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections and various Assembly elections held up to 2008. Nevertheless, through its assertive conduct, the Election Commission demonstrated its authority to enforce compliance with its directives. In cases of bogus voting or booth capturing, elections are cancelled even before vote counting, and re-polls are ordered. As a result of these measures, during the period 1991–2008, the Election Commission succeeded in significantly controlling deficiencies, irregularities, and malpractices in the electoral system. The Commission was also granted disciplinary authority over election personnel deployed during elections.

Growing Influence of Money Power

With each successive election, the number of millionaire candidates has continued to rise. According to an assessment by the **Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)**, more than 80 percent of Members of Parliament elected in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections from major national and regional parties were millionaires. This included 38 percent from the Bharatiya Janata Party, 91 percent from the Indian National Congress, and 100 percent from the Biju Janata Dal and Lok Janshakti Party.² In the 2019 elections, approximately ₹60,000 crore was spent, and a similar trend was observed in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Although the Election Commission has prescribed an expenditure limit of ₹70 lakh per candidate in Lok Sabha elections, this amount remains far beyond the reach of an ordinary citizen. Therefore, it is essential to minimize the influence of money in elections so that capable and deserving individuals can participate in the political process. Mechanisms similar to the **primary election system in the United States** may be considered. Otherwise, there is a risk that democracy—once regarded as an instrument of human emancipation—may become subservient to money power.

Transparency in Electoral Funding

Free, fair, and transparent elections form the backbone of democracy, and hence the demand for electoral reforms has been raised repeatedly in India. It is widely accepted that noble ends must be achieved through ethical means. Concerns have often been raised by political thinkers regarding the sources and use of electoral funding collected by political parties. The increasing role of money in elections has posed serious challenges to Indian democracy, making transparency in political funding an urgent necessity.

Prime Minister **Shri Narendra Modi** has repeatedly emphasized the need for transparency in the political process, including clarity in political donations. While almost every political party and leader speaks in favor of transparent electoral funding, effective implementation has remained limited. Former President **Pranab Mukherjee** and the Election Commission have also called for concrete steps in this direction. To ensure transparency in electoral funding, the following measures should be implemented:

- Political parties should receive donations only through **digital and cashless modes**.
- Political parties should be brought under the **Right to Information Act** so that citizens can access relevant information.
- The **Central Information Commission's decision dated 3 June 2013**, which mandated the appointment of Public Information Officers by political parties, should be effectively enforced.

Criminalisation and Democracy: A Deepening Crisis (1977–1990)

During the period between 1977 and 1990, political competition within the electoral process intensified significantly. Along with this, growing personal ambitions led to frequent splits within political parties even over minor issues. Divisions were not limited to smaller parties; major political parties also witnessed fragmentation. During this phase, maintaining party discipline emerged as a serious challenge for the Election Commission. The increasing influence of money power in elections contributed to the erosion of political socialisation and democratic values. Simultaneously, violent tendencies began to surface in the electoral process.³

The 1980 elections marked a turning point when candidates with criminal backgrounds were elected to Parliament for the first time.⁴ This trend continued in subsequent elections. At present, criminalisation in politics has reached such proportions that no political party remains untouched by it. According to a survey conducted by the **Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)**, in

the 2014 General Elections, 13 percent of Congress candidates, 21 percent of BJP candidates, 15 percent of BSP candidates, 24 percent of SP candidates, 45 percent of RJD candidates, and 40 percent of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) candidates had criminal records.⁵

In the 2024 elections, the number of candidates with criminal backgrounds included: BJP (28), Congress (19), AIADMK (13), DMK (13), CPI (2), CPI(M) (3), AAP (1), Shiv Sena (1), and NCP (SP) (1). The Election Commission has attempted to curb this trend but has largely remained unsuccessful. The only effective solution lies in the enactment of stringent laws and their transparent enforcement, which alone can instill fear among public servants and political leaders. Moreover, criminal cases pending against elected representatives should be decided expeditiously so that the Election Commission faces no difficulty in disqualifying convicted candidates.

Right to Recall Elected Representatives

In every representative democracy, citizens elect their representatives with the expectation that they will voice public concerns and actively work towards policy formulation and problem-solving. However, when the conduct of elected representatives runs contrary to public expectations, the provision allowing citizens to remove such representatives is known as the **Right to Recall**.

The concept of the Right to Recall originated in Switzerland and was first implemented in 1903 in the Los Angeles Municipality and later in 1908 for state officials in Michigan and Oregon in the United States. In India, **Jayaprakash Narayan** raised the slogan of the Right to Recall during the *Total Revolution* movement in 1974. The Supreme Court of India has also observed in one of its judgments that the Right to Recall could serve as an effective mechanism for empowering citizens.

Former Bihar Chief Minister **Nitish Kumar** introduced this provision through amendments to the Municipal Act, and the Right to Recall is already applicable at the Panchayat level in Bihar. During the nationwide anti-corruption movement in 2011, social activist **Anna Hazare** and his supporters also strongly advocated for the Right to Recall.

Public dissatisfaction with the irresponsible conduct of elected representatives is steadily increasing in India. In such a context, the Right to Recall can serve as an effective democratic tool. However, political parties have shown little enthusiasm in implementing this reform, often citing concerns regarding transparency and procedural integrity.

Electronic Voting Machine (EVM)

The introduction of **Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)** represents a significant initiative undertaken by the Election Commission. In 1989, a new Section 61A was added to the Representation of the People Act, granting legal validity to EVMs. Their experimental use began during the 1998 Assembly elections in Delhi, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. Goa became the first state to conduct elections entirely through EVMs in 1999. At present, almost all elections in India are conducted using EVMs.

Recently, some political parties filed petitions before the Supreme Court demanding a return to ballot paper voting, which the Court rejected. Repeated allegations of EVM tampering have often diverted attention from more serious issues of electoral integrity, such as the possibility of physical control over EVMs in party-dominated booths and the absence of polling agents of opposition parties. Concerns regarding unusually high voter turnout during the final hours of polling also remain unresolved.⁶ The Election Commission has not yet provided a satisfactory explanation for this trend. Therefore, the Commission should disclose not only percentage turnout figures but also the absolute number of votes cast during the final hours of polling.

Voter Identity Card

The 1990s proved to be a crucial decade for electoral reforms. Between 1991 and 1996, the Election Commission initiated several landmark measures. The introduction of the **photo-based Voter Identity Card** in 1993 was one such reform. Although the proposal was still under consideration, the Election Commission issued a notification declaring that elections could not be conducted without voter identity cards. This decision was challenged by the governments of West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala in the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court ruled that elections could not be postponed due to the absence of voter identity cards but directed all states to ensure their full implementation by the year 2000.⁷ Today, voter identity cards are mandatory for all elections, significantly reducing instances of bogus voting. However, recent large-scale additions and deletions of voter names have become a concerning pattern. Allegations of selective deletion of Muslim voters in Delhi and biased police action during Uttar Pradesh by-elections have raised serious questions. Hence, the Election Commission must ensure complete transparency in voter list revisions.

NOTA (None of the Above)

The concept of rejecting all candidates through **NOTA (None of the Above)** was introduced following a Supreme Court judgment dated 27 September 2013, which recognised negative voting as a form of freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a). The Election Commission subsequently introduced the NOTA option in Assembly elections held in November–December 2013 and in the 16th Lok Sabha elections in 2014.

While granting NOTA is a significant democratic step, public awareness regarding its implications remains limited, with many mistakenly equating it to the Right to Recall. In reality, NOTA merely enables voters to express dissent. Even if NOTA secures more votes than any candidate, the election is not annulled; instead, the candidate with the highest valid votes is declared elected. From a democratic standpoint, if NOTA secures the highest number of votes, a re-election should be considered.

One Nation, One Election

In his address on the eve of Republic Day in 2018, President **Ram Nath Kovind** emphasized India's pluralistic and diverse culture as its greatest strength. He highlighted the need for reasoned and informed democratic engagement and suggested that the Election Commission initiate discussions with political parties regarding the simultaneous conduct of Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** subsequently advanced this proposal with greater seriousness.

Frequent elections impose a substantial financial burden on the public exchequer due to election expenditure, deployment of paramilitary forces, administrative machinery, and repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct. Recurrent elections also affect fiscal policies, as demonstrated by loan waiver announcements in Uttar Pradesh (2017) and Maharashtra in response to electoral pressures.

The Election Commission has stated that it possesses the capacity to conduct simultaneous elections across the country. Accordingly, bills have been introduced in Parliament to implement the **One Nation, One Election** proposal, citing high costs, administrative disruption, and developmental stagnation due to repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct.

Model Code of Conduct

To ensure free, fair, and transparent elections, the **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)** was formulated to regulate the behaviour of political parties, candidates, and election workers. Developed with the consensus of political parties, the MCC was first implemented during the

1960 Kerala Assembly elections and later during the 1962 Lok Sabha elections, with systematic enforcement beginning in 1967.

The Code lays down guidelines prohibiting damage to public property, excessive use of vehicles and loudspeakers, inflammatory speeches, use of religious places for campaigning, and unauthorized public meetings. Although the MCC is voluntary in nature, the Election Commission takes prompt action upon receiving complaints. Over time, due to widespread compliance, the MCC has evolved from a mere code into a **moral code of conduct**.

Vote Share in the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections⁸

S. No.	National Political Party	Vote Share (%)
1	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	36.56
2	Indian National Congress	21.19
3	Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)	1.11
4	Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	2.04
5	National People's Party	—
6	Communist Party of India (Marxist)	1.76

Special Intensive Revision (SIR)

Under the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), voter lists are prepared through door-to-door enumeration without reference to existing rolls. This process is adopted when the Election Commission concludes that existing electoral rolls require comprehensive restructuring due to errors or post-delimitation changes.

In Bihar, the Election Commission conducted SIR to ensure that no eligible citizen was excluded and no ineligible individual included. New electoral rolls were published only after resolving all claims and objections, with the objective of creating accurate and reliable voter lists.⁹ Article 326 of the Constitution guarantees voting rights to all citizens aged 18 years and above.¹⁰

By 30 September 2025, Bihar's SIR resulted in the deletion of approximately 47 lakh names and the addition of over 21 lakh new voters, reducing the electorate to 7.42 crore.¹¹ While the Election Commission asserted transparency and inclusiveness, the Supreme Court is reviewing deletions in districts such as Supaul and Kishanganj to ensure fairness.

Conclusion

Elections constitute the lifeblood of democracy. It is through elections that democracy remains vibrant, dynamic, and continuous. Public trust and legitimacy are the foundational values upon which a democratic system of governance operates. By incorporating marginalized sections of society—such as Dalits, backward classes, extremely backward classes, and other oppressed groups—into the democratic process, elections have contributed significantly to democratic empowerment. The strongest democracy is one that ensures the widest possible public participation.

The contribution of the Election Commission of India in strengthening democracy has been unparalleled. In a democratic governance system, elections function as a vital bridge between the government and the citizens. Democracy can truly be described as “of the people, by the people, and for the people” only when elected representatives genuinely reflect the will and aspirations of the populace. Democracy can flourish only in an environment characterized by free and fair elections, voluntary participation, and freedom of thought and expression. Accurate assessment of public opinion is an essential prerequisite for a strong democracy.

India is globally recognized for its robust electoral democracy. There are compelling reasons for democratic scholars worldwide to acknowledge the significance of India's 17th Lok Sabha

election. The successful conduct of these elections reaffirms India's position as a democracy that continues to withstand rigorous democratic scrutiny. For the first time since the implementation of universal adult franchise, voter participation reached 66.4 percent nationwide, placing India among the countries with the highest voter turnout globally. Despite the length and scale of the electoral process, the generally peaceful, orderly, free, and fair conduct of elections demonstrates India's internal strength and the resilience of its democratic framework.

References

1. Government of India. (1951). *The Constitution of India*, Articles 324–329.
2. Association for Democratic Reforms. (n.d.). *Election Watch*. Retrieved from <http://adrindia.org>
3. Kaviraj, S. (1988). A critique of the passive revolution. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23(41), 2243–2249.
4. Roy, J. G. (1991). Administering clean and fair elections in India. *The Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 37, 383–391.
5. Association for Democratic Reforms. (n.d.). *Election Watch*. Retrieved from <http://adrindia.org>
6. *The Hindu*. (2024, December 19). Patna Edition.
7. Sharma, R. (2018). *Op. cit.*, p. 64.
8. Election Commission of India. (2024). *Lok Sabha Election Results*. Retrieved from <https://results.eci.gov.in>
9. Chief Electoral Officer, Bihar. (2025). *Press Release on Special Intensive Revision*. Retrieved from <https://ceoelection.bihar.gov.in>
10. Government of India. *The Constitution of India*, Article 326.
11. Press Information Bureau. (2025). *Final Voter List for Bihar Assembly Elections*. Retrieved from <https://www.pib.gov.in>
12. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2173370>[[4]](<https://ddnews.gov.in/bihar-assembly-elections-2025-final-voter-list-released-7-42-crore-voters-will-cast-their-votes/>)