

## **Political Parties and Electoral Reforms in India – A Study**

**Boska Nagaraju**

Research Scholar, Department of Public Administration & HRM, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana.

### **Introduction**

Elections are the lifeline of any democratic system, serving as the mechanism through which the people express their will and renew their faith in governance. In India, the world's largest democracy, the importance of elections becomes even more pronounced due to the nation's socio-cultural diversity, vast electorate, and complex federal structure. For democracy to remain meaningful, elections must be free, fair, and transparent. While the first three general elections in independent India—1952, 1957, and 1962—were widely regarded as models of integrity and administrative efficiency, the subsequent decades witnessed a steady deterioration in electoral standards. The rise of money and muscle power, politicization of institutions, malpractices such as booth capturing, voter intimidation, and increasing corruption led to widespread concerns about the sanctity of Indian elections.

Against this backdrop, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has consistently attempted to reform the system to restore public trust and reinforce democratic values. These reforms, implemented through administrative measures, legislative amendments, and technological innovations, have had significant implications for the electoral process, political parties, and overall democratic functioning. This paper presents an analytical review of these reforms and assesses their impact.

In the early decades after independence, India's electoral process enjoyed substantial credibility due to the moral authority of leaders, limited competition for power, and strong institutional commitment. However, beginning with the fourth general election in 1967, electoral politics became increasingly competitive and fragmented, leading to the growing influence of caste, religion, regionalism, and money. Politicians resorted to unethical practices such as bribing voters, rigging votes, and exploiting administrative loopholes. The Emergency period (1975–77) also demonstrated how elections could be manipulated through state machinery. These developments raised serious questions about the robustness of India's democratic institutions.

Public disillusionment and political instability made electoral reform an urgent necessity. Over time, the ECI, in collaboration with various governments, committees, and civil society organizations, introduced a series of measures aimed at creating a more transparent and accountable electoral framework.

### **Electoral Reforms Initiated by the Election Commission of India**

#### **Technological Innovations**

One of the most significant interventions has been the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), first experimentally used in the 1990s and fully adopted in 2004. EVMs drastically reduced invalid votes, eliminated booth stuffing associated with ballot papers, and expedited the counting process. To address concerns over EVM tampering, the Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) system was launched, allowing voters to verify their choices and establishing an auditable paper trail.

Additionally, the adoption of Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (ERPAP), linking of electoral rolls with Aadhaar (voluntary), and online systems for voter registration further modernized the process.

### **Measures to Curb Money Power**

The ECI set expenditure limits for candidates, mandated disclosure of campaign spending, and introduced stricter monitoring through flying squads and static surveillance teams. The Supreme Court's landmark judgments and reforms such as electoral bonds (though controversial) attempted to bring more transparency to political funding. While the effectiveness of these reforms remains debated, they represent efforts to curtail the pervasive influence of money.

### **Criminalization of Politics**

One persistent challenge has been the infiltration of criminal elements into politics. The ECI, supported by the judiciary, mandated that candidates declare their criminal records in sworn affidavits. The Supreme Court's directives requiring political parties to justify the selection of candidates with criminal backgrounds also represent an important step toward ethical politics.

### **Voter Education and Awareness**

The establishment of the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) program significantly improved voter awareness and engagement. Through campaigns, community outreach, and digital platforms, the ECI sought to increase voter turnout and discourage corrupt practices.

### **Electoral Roll Reforms**

Efforts to ensure accurate voter lists—such as door-to-door verification, de-duplication of electoral rolls, and online correction facilities—reduced the scope for manipulation. Clean electoral rolls are foundational to the integrity of the voting process.

### **Institutional and Administrative Reforms**

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC), though not legally binding, has become an important tool for regulating campaign behavior. The ECI's enforcement of MCC—restricting the misuse of government resources, curbing hate speech, and regulating campaign methods—has strengthened the fairness of elections.

### **Impact on the Election System**

The cumulative effect of these reforms has been substantial. EVMs and VVPATs have increased efficiency and reduced malpractice. The enforcement of MCC has instilled greater discipline in political campaigns. Monitoring mechanisms have curtailed blatant misuse of money, even though loopholes persist. Voter awareness programs have empowered citizens by educating them about their rights and responsibilities.

However, challenges remain. Electoral bonds—though intended to introduce transparency—have been criticized for allowing anonymous corporate donations, raising concerns about undue influence and opacity. The rise of social media has created new avenues for misinformation, which current laws and mechanisms struggle to regulate. While manipulation of voter rolls has reduced, allegations of selective deletions or inclusions still surface periodically.

### **Impact on Political Parties**

Electoral reforms have forced political parties to adapt to changing expectations of transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. Mandatory disclosures of candidates' assets, liabilities, and criminal backgrounds have increased public scrutiny. Spending limits and

monitoring mechanisms have constrained extravagant campaigns, though many parties continue to find informal ways to circumvent them.

The push for internal democracy within parties—though still inadequate—has gained momentum. Reforms have also encouraged parties to professionalize campaign strategies, adopt digital tools, and improve organizational structures. However, the persistent influence of dynastic politics, opaque funding networks, and ideological polarization indicates that reforms have only partially transformed political culture.

### **Impact on Indian Democracy**

The most significant effect of electoral reforms has been the reinforcement of public trust in democratic processes. Increased voter turnout in recent elections reflects growing citizen engagement and confidence in the system. The ECI's proactive role has strengthened the perception of independence and impartiality, even though occasional controversies emerge.

Despite reforms, the democratization of India's political space remains incomplete. Money power, identity-based mobilization, and information manipulation continue to distort electoral choices. Yet, without the reforms initiated so far, India's democratic fabric would have suffered far greater erosion. The reforms have served as a safeguard, preventing deeper institutional decay and ensuring that democratic competition remains viable.

### **Major Issues in Indian Electoral Politics**

Indian electoral politics, despite being part of the world's largest democratic exercise, continues to face multiple structural, ethical, and administrative challenges. These issues, persistent over decades, influence voter behaviour, political competition, and the overall quality of democracy.

#### **1. Money Power**

The excessive use of money during elections is one of the most serious issues. Rising campaign costs, unregulated donations, voter bribery, and expenditure beyond prescribed limits distort the level playing field. Wealthy candidates and parties gain undue advantage, undermining fairness.

#### **2. Muscle Power and Criminalization of Politics**

A significant number of candidates with pending criminal cases contest elections. Criminal elements influence voter choices through intimidation or social dominance. Political parties often justify fielding them due to their "winnability," leading to a cycle of compromised ethics and governance.

#### **3. Caste, Religion, and Identity Politics**

Elections in many regions are heavily influenced by caste loyalties, religious appeals, and identity-based mobilization. This reduces political discourse to identity assertion rather than policy debates, fragmenting society and weakening democratic deliberation.

#### **4. Electoral Violence and Malpractices**

Though reduced over time due to reforms, practices such as booth capturing, impersonation, rigging, and misuse of government machinery still occur in some areas. These undermine trust in the electoral process.

#### **5. Misuse of Official Machinery**

Incumbent governments often exploit administrative apparatus, public funds, or state media to influence voters. Despite the Model Code of Conduct, enforcement gaps remain.

## **6. Lack of Internal Democracy in Political Parties**

Most political parties suffer from centralised leadership, opaque decision-making, hereditary succession, and weak internal elections. This affects candidate selection, accountability, and democratic culture.

## **7. Opaque Political Funding**

Political donations are often untraceable, routed through informal channels. Although some reforms exist, lack of transparency enables corporate influence, corruption, and policy capture.

## **8. Misinformation and Media Manipulation**

The rise of digital media has enabled fake news, hate speech, propaganda, and targeted misinformation campaigns, influencing voter perception. Paid news and partisan media further distort information flow.

## **9. Voter Apathy and Low Urban Turnout**

While overall turnout is decent, urban areas often show lower participation due to apathy, distrust in political processes, or logistical hurdles. This affects representativeness.

## **10. Electoral Roll Errors**

Despite improvements, issues like missing names, duplicates, and incorrect entries persist. Such errors disenfranchise voters and raise questions of fairness.

## **11. Fragmentation and Coalition Instability**

The rise of multiple regional parties leads to fragmented mandates and frequent coalition politics. While reflective of diversity, it often results in unstable governments and policy inconsistency.

### **Electoral Reforms Pre-2000**

**Lowering of Voting Age:** The 61<sup>st</sup> Amendment Act to the Constitution reduced the minimum age for voting from 21 to 18 years. (read about important amendments in the Indian Constitution, in the linked article.)

**Deputation to Election Commission:** All personnel working in preparing, revising and correcting the electoral rolls for elections shall be considered to be on deputation to the EC for the period of such employment, and they shall be superintended by the EC.

**Increase in the number of proposers and the security deposit:** The number of electors required to sign as proposers in the nomination papers for elections to the Rajya Sabha and the State Legislative Councils has been raised to 10% of the electors of the constituency or ten such electors, whichever is less chiefly to prevent frivolous candidates. The security deposit has also been hiked to prevent non-serious candidates.

**Electronic Voting Machine (EVMs):** First introduced in 1998 during the state elections of Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, EVMs are used widely now as they are fool-proof, efficient and a better option in terms of the environment.

**Disqualification on conviction for violating the National Honours Act, 1971:** This shall lead to disqualification of the person for 6 years from contesting to the Parliament and the state legislatures.

**Restriction on contesting from more than 2 constituencies:** A candidate cannot contest from more than 2 constituencies.

**Death of a contesting candidate:** Previously, the election was countermanded on the death of a contesting candidate. In the future, no election will be countermanded on the death of a contesting candidate. If the deceased candidate, however, was set up by a recognized national or state party, then the party concerned will be given an option to nominate another candidate

within 7 days of the issue of a notice to that effect to the party concerned by the Election Commission.**Electoral Reforms Post 2000:**

**Ceiling on election expenditure:** At present, there is no limit on the amount a political party can spend in an election or on a candidate. But, the Commission has put a cap on individual candidates' spending. For the Lok Sabha elections, it is Rs. 50 – 70 lakh (depending on the state they are contesting the Lok Sabha seat from), and Rs. 20 – 28 lakh for an assembly election.

**Restriction on exit polls:** The EC issued a statement before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections saying that exit poll results could be broadcast only after the final phase of the elections were over. This was done to avoid prospective voters being misguided or prejudiced in any manner.

**Voting through postal ballot:** In 2013, the EC decided to expand the ambit of postal ballot voting in the country. Previously, only Indian staff in missions abroad and defence personnel in a limited way, could vote via postal ballots. Now, there are 6 categories of voters who can use the postal ballot: service voters; special voters; wives of service voters and special voters; voters subjected to preventive detention; voters on election duty and Notified voters.

**Awareness Creation:** The government decided to observe January 25th as 'National Voters Day' to mark the EC's founding day. Read more on the National Voters' Day here.

### **Conclusion**

Electoral reforms in India represent a continuous journey toward strengthening democratic governance. From technological upgrades to administrative measures and policy interventions, the ECI has played a pivotal role in enhancing the transparency, efficiency, and fairness of elections. Although challenges persist—particularly in political funding, criminalization of politics, and ethical conduct—reforms have significantly mitigated malpractices and restored credibility to the electoral process.

Ultimately, electoral reforms alone cannot sustain democracy; they must be complemented by political will, voter awareness, judicial oversight, and active civil society participation. India's democratic future depends not merely on the periodic conduct of elections, but on the collective commitment to uphold democratic values. The ongoing pursuit of electoral reforms reflects both the resilience of Indian democracy and its capacity for self-correction.

Over the decades, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has introduced numerous major and minor political reforms to uphold the dignity, transparency, and credibility of the electoral process. These reforms—administrative, technological, legal, and behavioural—have significantly transformed the election system. They also highlight the immense responsibility vested in the ECI as the authoritative body supervising elections, guiding election officials, and regulating political parties. A critical feature of India's reform process is that each important reform emerged from the recommendations of expert committees appointed to study specific electoral challenges.

One of the earliest and most influential committees was the Tarkunde Committee (1974), which focused on civil liberties and electoral fairness. Although not fully implemented, its recommendations on voter privacy and independent election machinery influenced later reforms. Subsequently, the Goswami Committee on Electoral Reforms (1990) provided a comprehensive blueprint on electoral funding, campaign expenditure, and criminalization of politics. Its suggestions laid the groundwork for subsequent legislative amendments that introduced spending limits and disclosure requirements for candidates.

The Dinesh Goswami Committee's recommendations also significantly shaped reforms related to the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), voter registration practices, and stricter rules governing

political parties' conduct during campaigns. Later, the Indrajit Gupta Committee on State Funding of Elections (1998) recommended partial state funding to reduce the dependency on private donors, a suggestion that continues to influence policy debates and funding reforms. In the 2000s, the Lyngdoh Committee, tasked with examining student union elections, contributed indirectly to broader debates on ethical campaigning and the need to curb money and muscle power in elections. The Justice Verma Committee (2013), while primarily addressing criminal law amendments, also reaffirmed the need for disqualifying candidates involved in serious crimes—a recommendation that strengthened ongoing ECI measures against criminalization of politics.

Guided by these committees' insights, the ECI introduced numerous reforms. Major reforms include the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), which eliminated ballot-box rigging, reduced invalid votes, and expedited counting. Later, the VVPAT system ensured a verifiable paper trail, enhancing voter confidence and transparency. Other reforms include booth-level officers for ground-level verification, electoral roll purification, online registration, and the creation of the Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC)—all aimed at minimizing impersonation and duplication.

On the financial front, stricter expenditure monitoring, videography of rallies, flying squads, and mandatory disclosure of candidate assets stem from committee-driven recommendations to curb money power. Similarly, the requirement for political parties to file income and expenditure statements, audit reports, and donation lists emerged from reform committees' suggestions on political finance transparency.

The ECI has also strengthened the Model Code of Conduct, regulating campaign behaviour, preventing misuse of government machinery, and ensuring a level playing field. The Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) program is another reform aimed at raising voter awareness and encouraging ethical participation.

Together, these reforms—major and minor—reflect the ECI's continuous effort to safeguard the sanctity of elections. Importantly, they underscore the vital role of expert committees whose recommendations gave structured direction to electoral reform in India.

#### References:

1. Ali, R. (2008). Paid news and media manipulation in the Indian elections. *South Asian Journal of Politics*, 25(1), 30-40.
2. Anand, R. (2011). Simultaneous elections and their impact on governance in India. *Political Studies Review*, 42(3), 153-167.
3. Bhatnagar, Gaurav Vivek. "Electoral Bonds: Amid Concerns on Opacity, Donations Cross Rs 10,000-Crore Mark". *The Wire*. No. 2022-07-29. Retrieved 2022-08-29.
4. Chandra, K. (2017). Voter Apathy and the Future of Democracy in India *Journal of Indian Democracy*, 12(4), 178-190.
5. "Finance Bill 2017 passed in Lok Sabha". *Economic Times*. Retrieved 16 November 2019.
6. Lok Sabha elections 2019: All you need to know about electoral bonds". *Hindustan Times*. 20 March 2019. Retrieved 16 November 2019.
7. Maheswari, S. (2004). Electoral reforms in India: Challenges and solutions. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 65(3), 200-210.
8. Dr. T.S. Srinivasa, Political Parties And Electoral Reforms In India – A Critical Review, *IJMER*, Volume:11, Issue:5(1), May: 2022.
9. Venkatesh, S. (2017). The role of the Election Commission in electoral reforms in India. *Journal of Political Science*, 41(1), 50-68.