

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

www.ijlra.com

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Avinash Kumar



Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-1, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC – NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR – Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.

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ELECTORAL REFORMS IN INDIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

AUTHORED BY - MONIKA TYAGI
Pursuing LL.M from CPJ (GGSIPU)

Abstract

Elections are the lifeline of a democracy. They give citizens the power to choose their representatives and hold them accountable. India, the world's largest democracy, has developed a strong electoral framework through constitutional provisions, parliamentary laws, and the Election Commission of India (ECI). Yet, challenges like criminalization of politics, money power, booth capturing, social media misuse, and lack of transparency in funding have weakened electoral integrity. This research paper examines the evolution of electoral reforms in India, highlights constitutional and judicial contributions, analyses major challenges, discusses committee recommendations, and compares practices with other democracies. It concludes with suggestions for deepening electoral democracy in India.

Key Words: Elections, Reforms, Democracy, Criminalization, Money Power, Transparency.

Introduction

Elections are the heart of a democracy. They allow people to choose their leaders and take part in the process of governing the country. The Indian Constitution describes India as a democratic republic, where the government is chosen "by the people, of the people, and for the people." To make this possible, elections in India are conducted by the Election Commission of India (ECI), an independent body created to ensure that elections are held in a fair and impartial manner ¹.

But in practice, elections in India often face serious challenges. Problems like the use of money and muscle power, criminal politicians, unfair practices, and lack of democracy within political parties raise doubts about whether elections are truly free and fair. Over the years, several reforms have been suggested and introduced through laws, committee reports, and judgments of the courts to make the election process more transparent and trustworthy ².

The idea of free and fair elections means more than just holding a vote. It means giving every candidate an equal chance, protecting voters from pressure or corruption, and ensuring that citizens can make an informed choice. Important court cases, such as *Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain* (1975)³ and *Lily Thomas v. Union of India* (2013)⁴, have helped strengthen this principle.

1. Evolution of Electoral Reforms in India

The journey of electoral reforms in India has developed step by step since Independence. As the world's largest democracy, India has faced many challenges in conducting free and fair elections. To improve the process, reforms have been introduced through laws, committee recommendations, and important judgments of the courts.

1.1 Early Phase (1950s – 1960s)

Soon after Independence, the Representation of the People Acts, 1950 and 1951 created the framework of elections in India, dealing with the preparation of electoral rolls, conduct of elections, qualifications and disqualifications of members, and the settlement of election disputes⁵. In the early decades, elections were largely free from large-scale corruption, as money and muscle power had not yet become major concerns.

- **Universal Adult Franchise (1950): Every Indian citizen above 21 years got the right to vote (later reduced to 18 in 1989).**⁶

1.2. Emergence of Challenges (1970s – 1980s)

By the 1970s, issues like booth capturing, misuse of government machinery, and increasing criminal influence began affecting elections. The landmark case of *Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain* (1975) highlighted electoral malpractice and emphasized the principle that free and fair elections are part of the basic structure of the Constitution. This case also brought electoral integrity into the center of constitutional debate.³

1.3. Introduction of Reforms (1990s – 2000s)

The 1990s saw growing concern about criminalization of politics and corruption. Some key reforms during this time included:

- **Anti-Defection Law (1985):** Prevented elected representatives from changing parties frequently.⁷

- **61st Constitutional Amendment (1988):** lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 years.⁶
- **Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs):** introduced in the late 1990s to prevent ballot box tampering. ⁸
- **PUCL v. Union of India (2003):** made it mandatory for candidates to disclose their criminal records, assets, and educational qualifications. ⁹
- **Lily Thomas v. Union of India (2013):** held that convicted legislators would be disqualified immediately, reducing the entry of criminals into politics. ⁴

1.4. Recent Developments (2010s – Present)

In recent years, several new reforms have been introduced:

- **Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT):** added to EVMs for transparency. ¹⁰
- **NOTA (2013):** “None of the Above” option to give voters a right to reject all candidates.
- **Aadhaar–Voter ID linking:** to prevent duplication of voter rolls.
- **Mobile apps and digital platforms:** launched by the Election Commission to monitor election expenses and spread voter awareness.
- **Electoral bonds (2017):** introduced for political funding, though criticized for lack of transparency.

2 .Why Electoral Reforms in India ?

Electoral reforms are essential for strengthening democracy in India by improving transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity.

2.1 Need for Reforms:

- **Strengthening Participation:** Simplify voter registration and boost turnout (Goswami Committee). ¹¹
- **Addressing Corruption:** Break the criminal-politician nexus (Vohra Committee). ¹²
- **Curbing Expenditure:** Control rising election costs to ensure fairness (2nd ARC). ¹³
- **Improving Integrity:** Enhance transparency in funding and prevent manipulation (ECI & Law Commission). ¹⁴
- **Ensuring Inclusivity:** Expand voting access for marginalised groups (NCRWC). ¹⁵

2.2. One Nation-One Election (ONOE) Significance:

- **Economic Growth:** Boosts GDP and stability (Kovind Committee). ¹⁶
- **Better Public Spending:** Encourages capital investment.

- **Stable Investments:** Reduces uncertainty for investors.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Cuts huge election expenses (e.g., ₹4,500+ crore per cycle).
- **Improved Governance:** Avoids frequent Model Code of Conduct disruptions.
- **Reduced Money Power:** Lowers campaign costs (2024 elections projected at ₹1.35 lakh crore).
- **National Unity:** Minimises caste and communal politics, shifting focus to national issues.

3. Election-related Constitutional Provisions ¹⁷

- Article 324 – The Election Commission of India (ECI) controls and manages elections in the country. It makes electoral rolls, conducts polling, counts votes, declares results, and also recognizes political parties and their symbols.
- Article 325 – No one can be excluded from the voters' list on the basis of religion, caste, or community. There will be one common voter list for everyone.
- Article 326 – Every Indian citizen 18 years or older has the right to vote (universal adult suffrage), unless disqualified by law (e.g., due to criminal conviction or unsound mind).
- Article 327 – Parliament has the power to make and change laws about elections.
- Article 328 – State Legislatures can also make laws on state elections, but these cannot conflict with Parliament's laws.
- Article 329 – Courts cannot interfere in elections while they are going on. Challenges can only be made after the election is over.

4. Major Committees on Electoral Reforms

Tarkunde / Jaya Prakash Narayan Committee (1974) ¹⁸

- Change how the Chief Election Commissioner is appointed.
- Create a 3-member Election Commission.
- Reduce voting age from 21 to 18 years (done by 61st Amendment, 1988).
- Keep TV and radio under an independent corporation (not govt. control).

Dinesh Goswami Committee (1990)

- Fix time limit for by-elections.
- Increase deposits for independent candidates.
- Regulate ads in newspapers, strengthen the Election Commission.
- Make laws to stop booth capturing and intimidation.

- Amend anti-defection laws to prevent misuse.
- Allow proxy voting for military and diplomats abroad.
- Ban candidates from contesting more than 2 constituencies.
- Restructure election expense accounting.

Jeevan Reddy Committee ¹⁹

- Ban splits and mergers of parties during Lok Sabha/Assembly term.
- If a member wins on a party ticket, they must stay with that party.
- Ensure proper representation.
- Increase deposits for independent/non-recognized candidates to stop unserious ones.
- Disqualify candidates with serious criminal charges.

Vohra Committee (1993)

- Found deep links between crime syndicates and politicians.
- Criminals entered politics at all levels (local, state, national).
- Mafia networks acted like a parallel government.
- Recommended banning criminals from politics.

Indrajit Gupta Committee (1998–99) ²⁰

- Recommended state funding of elections (in-kind, not cash).
- Create Election Corpus Fund (₹600 crore, shared by Centre and States).
- Only EC-recognized parties should get support (printing, media, vehicles, fuel).
- Parties must file annual accounts with the Income Tax Department.
- All election expenditure should be reported to the EC.
- Donations above ₹10,000 must be by cheque/draft with donor names disclosed.
- Ban on government companies giving donations for political purposes.

Law Commission Report on Electoral Reform

In 1999, a commission led by B.P. Jeevan Reddy suggested reforms to:

- Make elections more fair, transparent, and representative.
- Strengthen democracy.
- Ensure stability in governance.

The Election Commission later proposed detailed reforms and implemented many of these suggestions

5. Landmark Supreme Court Jurisprudence Shaping “Free & Fair”

1. Voters’ Right to Know (Disclosures)

- Union of India v. ADR (2002) & PUCL (2003): Candidates must disclose criminal antecedents, assets/liabilities and education; this derives from the voter’s Article 19(1)(a) right to information. This jurisprudence constitutionalized transparency at the nomination stage.

2. NOTA (Right to Reject)

- PUCL v. Union of India (2013): Introduced NOTA to preserve secrecy and give voters a meaningful negative choice—intended to discipline parties in candidate selection.

3. Immediate Disqualification on Conviction

- Lily Thomas v. Union of India (2013): Struck down RPA §8(4); MPs/MLAs convicted (≥ 2 -year sentence) stand immediately disqualified—a key clean-politics pillar.

4. Curbing Sectarian Appeals

- Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen (2017) (7-J bench; 4–3): Interprets RPA §123(3) broadly—no appeals to religion, race, caste, community or language of candidates or voters; violations are a “corrupt practice.”

5. Paper Trail for EVMs

Subramanian Swamy v. ECI (2013): Directed nationwide adoption of VVPAT to bolster auditability and public confidence in electronic voting.

6. Other Reforms by the Election Commission and Indian Government

- **Electoral Bonds Scheme:** Citizens/companies in India can buy bonds from SBI to donate money to political parties (donor’s name not revealed).
- **VVPAT with EVMs:** Shows voters a paper slip to confirm their vote went to the correct candidate.

- **SVEEP Program:** Spreads voter education and awareness to encourage people to vote wisely.
- **cVIGIL App:** Lets people report election code violations with time-stamped proof.
- **NOTA (None of the Above):** Voters can reject all candidates if they don't like any.
- **Decriminalization of Elections:** Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms (2002) – Mandatory disclosure of criminal, financial, and educational background.
- **National Voters' Day (Jan 25):** Celebrated to spread awareness about voting rights.
- **Voter Helpline App:** Helps with registration and other voter services.
- **Divyang Apps (Sarathi & Doli):** For persons with disabilities to vote more easily.
- **Committees for Accessible Elections:** At national and state levels.

7. Major Issues Relating to the Election Process

1. Money Power

The use of money in elections has become widespread. Candidates spend huge sums on campaigning, advertisements, rallies, and even on buying votes. Since election expenditure is not effectively controlled, money power creates inequality among candidates, giving wealthier ones an unfair advantage.

- Black money and freebies distort fairness. Kanwar Lal Gupta v. Amar Nath Chawla (1975) observed that unlimited spending undermines equality.

2. Criminalisation of Politics

A large number of candidates with criminal records enter politics. They misuse their influence and power to win elections. This weakens democracy, as voters may be forced to choose between candidates with criminal backgrounds rather than genuine leaders.

3. Misuse of Government Machinery

Ruling political parties often use government resources during elections. For example, government vehicles, officials, and funds may be diverted for election purposes. This gives ruling parties an unfair advantage and violates the principle of free and fair elections.

4. Political Violence

Election campaigns sometimes witness violence, clashes, and intimidation between rival political groups. Such violence disturbs peace and harmony, discourages voters from casting

their vote freely, and undermines democracy.

5. Communal & Caste-based Politics

Candidates often appeal to voters on the basis of caste or religion rather than development or policies. This deepens social divisions, fuels hatred, and weakens the secular spirit of democracy.

6 Collapse of Administration

From the time elections are announced until results are declared, normal administrative work slows down because officials are engaged in election duties. This affects governance and creates difficulties for the general public.

7. Political Pressure

Election officers often face pressure from ruling party leaders. If they take strict actions against violations, they may face transfers or punishment. This weakens the independence of election officials and compromises the fairness of elections.

8. Ceiling Expenditure Issues

Although there are limits on how much candidates can spend, it is difficult to trace actual expenditure. Many candidates spend beyond the prescribed ceiling using black money, and election officers often lack cooperation to enforce these limits.

9. Wastage of Time

Elections in India are conducted frequently—general elections, state elections, by-elections, and re-elections. This not only consumes a lot of time but also wastes public money and resources. For example, resignations and re-contesting from multiple constituencies lead to repeated elections unnecessarily.

10. Freebies Influence Voters

Political parties often distribute free gifts like cash, alcohol, or household items to attract voters. While this may benefit people temporarily, it manipulates voter choice and distracts them from focusing on real issues like development, education, or healthcare.

11. Lack of Independent Staff

The Election Commission of India (ECI) does not have its own permanent workforce and relies heavily on government employees for conducting elections. This reduces efficiency, as government staff may be biased or under political pressure, affecting the neutrality of the election process.

12. No Legal Power for Model Code of Conduct (MCC)

The MCC is a set of guidelines to ensure fair campaigning. However, it is not legally binding. The Election Commission can issue warnings or recommendations but cannot punish violators directly. This makes it difficult to control misconduct during elections.

13. Booth Capturing

In some areas, political party supporters or local criminals take control of polling booths by threatening or forcing voters. This practice, though reduced due to Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and security forces, still exists in certain regions, undermining free and fair voting.

14. Criminalisation of Politics

Many candidates with criminal backgrounds contest and even win elections. Political parties often prioritize “winnability” over integrity, giving tickets to such candidates. This damages the image of democracy and increases corruption in governance.

15. Social Media Misuse

Social media platforms are widely used for campaigning, but they are also misused. Fake news, hate speech, manipulated videos, and targeted propaganda spread quickly, creating echo chambers and influencing voter behavior unfairly.

16. Inaccessibility for Persons with Disabilities (PwD)

Despite legal provisions, many polling stations are not accessible for people with disabilities. Lack of ramps, wheelchairs, or sign language support makes it difficult for PwD voters to exercise their democratic right independently.

8. Comparative Perspective

1. United States

The United States follows a federal system of elections, meaning election laws and procedures

are regulated at both federal and state levels. This leads to variations across states in registration, voting methods, and campaign rules.

- **Federal and State Regulation:** While the Federal Election Commission (FEC) was established in 1975 to monitor campaign finance, each state sets its own rules on voter registration, mail-in ballots, and early voting. This decentralized system creates flexibility but also inconsistency in electoral practices.
- **Voting by Mail and Electronic Voting:** Many states allow absentee voting or vote by mail, especially popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some states have experimented with electronic voting machines and even limited online voting pilots to increase accessibility.
- **Campaign Finance & Citizens United v. FEC (2010):** A landmark Supreme Court ruling, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, held that corporate and union spending in elections cannot be restricted under the First Amendment (freedom of speech). While this increased political spending, it also raised concerns about the undue influence of wealthy corporations and lobbyists on elections.²¹

2. United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has introduced significant electoral reforms to make its democratic process more transparent and inclusive.²²

- **Electoral Commission (2000):** An independent statutory body created under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act, 2000, the Commission oversees elections, ensures compliance with electoral laws, and regulates party funding.
- **Campaign Spending Limits:** Unlike the U.S., the UK imposes strict limits on campaign expenditure and requires candidates and parties to disclose donations above a threshold. This curtails the influence of money power in politics.
- **First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) System:** The House of Commons elections are conducted under the FPTP system, where the candidate with the most votes wins. While simple, this system often benefits larger parties and disadvantages smaller ones, leading to criticism that it does not adequately represent minority groups.
- **Postal Voting:** The UK has expanded postal voting, allowing voters to cast ballots without physically visiting polling stations. This reform has increased voter turnout and made elections more accessible, especially for the elderly and those living abroad.

3. Australia

Australia is often cited as a model of effective electoral reforms due to its high voter participation and strong regulation of campaign finance. ²³

- **Compulsory Voting:** Since 1924, voting has been mandatory for all eligible citizens above 18. Failure to vote without a valid reason attracts fines. This reform ensures turnouts above 90%, one of the highest in the world.
- **Australian Electoral Commission (AEC):** Established as an independent federal agency, the AEC manages elections, maintains the electoral roll, and enforces rules on campaign conduct. Its independence enhances the credibility of elections.
- **Proportional Representation in the Senate:** While the House of Representatives follows preferential voting (ranked-choice), the Senate is elected through proportional representation, which ensures fair representation for smaller parties and minorities. This balances the dominance of major parties.
- **Campaign Finance Transparency:** Australia has strict rules on political donations, requiring disclosure of contributions above a threshold and banning foreign donations. Public funding is also provided to candidates based on the votes they secure, reducing reliance on private money.

9. Lessons for India from Other Democracies

- **Transparency in Political Funding** – India can adopt UK/Australia-style mandatory donation disclosure laws, banning anonymous and foreign contributions, instead of relying on opaque electoral bonds.
- **Increasing Voter Turnout** – Compulsory voting as in Australia or introducing postal/online voting like in the UK and US can increase participation, especially among youth, migrants, and NRIs.
- **Fair Representation** – India can consider Proportional Representation (PR) or Mixed-Member Systems (used in Germany, Australia's Senate) to better represent minorities and smaller parties.
- **Stronger Campaign Finance Monitoring** – Establishing a truly independent authority (similar to the UK Electoral Commission or US FEC) to audit party accounts can improve trust in elections.
- **Political Advertising Regulation**– The US and UK regulate paid political ads and campaign airtime, while India's spending on social media ads remains unchecked. India could impose caps and disclosure norms.

- **Public Funding of Elections** – Following Germany and Australia, India can provide partial state funding of elections, reducing candidates' dependence on corporate donations.
- **Compulsory Candidate Disclosure** – Strengthen requirements for criminal, financial, and educational disclosures, ensuring strict penalties for false declarations (similar to UK laws).
- **Use of Technology for Accessibility**– Electronic and online voting experiments in the US and postal ballots in the UK show how technology can help disabled, elderly, and migrant voters. India can adopt remote voting mechanisms for NRIs and migrant workers.
- **Strengthening Independent Electoral Body** – Like the Australian Electoral Commission, India's ECI should be granted full autonomy in appointments, funding, and enforcement powers, reducing executive interference.
- **Voter Education Programs**– Australia invests heavily in civic education and awareness drives. India can replicate this to reduce voter manipulation through freebies, caste, and religion-based politics.
- **Curtailing Lobbying and Corporate Influence**– The US experience of corporate lobbying and unlimited political action committee (PAC) spending shows dangers of unchecked private funding. India must prevent this by limiting corporate donations and strengthening CSR-political funding rules.
- **Gender and Minority Representation** – Countries like Norway and Sweden use quota systems and proportional representation to ensure women and minorities have stronger voices. India can revisit women's reservation in legislatures and explore PR models.

10. Suggestions for Future Reforms

- One Nation, One Election: Reduce cost and MCC disruptions.
- State Funding: To reduce corporate influence.
- Ban on Candidates with Serious Criminal Charges.
- Stronger Legal Backing for MCC.
- Transparency in Electoral Bonds: Mandatory donor disclosure.
- Digital/Postal Voting for NRIs and Migrant Workers.
- Enhanced Voter Education Programs (SVEEP).
- Increased Accessibility for PwDs.

Conclusion

Electoral reforms in India have evolved step by step since Independence, guided by legislation, committees, and judicial interventions. Yet, persistent challenges like money power, criminalization, and lack of transparency continue to weaken democracy. Learning from global best practices and empowering the Election Commission with greater autonomy are essential to ensure truly free and fair elections.

As reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in *Indira Gandhi v. Raj Narain* and *Mohinder Singh Gill v. CEC*, free and fair elections are part of the basic structure of the Constitution. Strengthening this principle is not only a political necessity but a constitutional duty.

Footnotes (LR)

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