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# **THE LEGAL REGULATIONS GOVERNING ELECTIONS IN INDIA- ADDRESSING THE FUNCTIONAL ISSUES**

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## **Brief Note:**

The legal framework governing elections in India is enshrined primarily in the Constitution of India, particularly under Articles 324 to 329, and is further elaborated through key legislative instruments such as the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and 1951, the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968, and the Delimitation Acts. These statutes, along with the rules and regulations formulated by the Election Commission of India, establish the procedural and substantive norms for the conduct of elections, voter eligibility, and the functioning of electoral bodies. The legal provisions aim to ensure the integrity of the electoral process, guarantee universal suffrage, and uphold the principles of fairness and equality. Despite these extensive legal structures, significant functional challenges persist, including issues of electoral fraud, misuse of money power, voter suppression, and concerns regarding the impartiality of electoral administration. Moreover, the independence and autonomy of the Election Commission, the adequacy of the legal framework to address emerging technological and social media issues, and the potential for electoral reforms, such as the introduction of online voting or proportional representation, remain areas of concern. In this scenario the author makes an attempt to critically examine the current legal regime, identify key functional issues impeding the effectiveness of elections, and explores potential legal reforms aimed at enhancing the transparency, accountability, and democratic legitimacy of the electoral process in India.

**Key Words:** *Election Laws, India, Functional Issues*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Elections are the cornerstone of any democracy, serving as the primary mechanism through which citizens exercise their right to vote and influence governance. They ensure the peaceful transfer of power, uphold the principle of accountability, and reflect the collective will of the people. Elections provide legitimacy to governments, fostering public trust and stability within the political system. By enabling participation, elections empower citizens to voice their opinions, advocate for their interests, and choose leaders who align with their aspirations and values. Additionally, they promote transparency, encourage political competition, and safeguard democratic ideals by holding representatives answerable to the electorate.

Legal regulations are essential for ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections that uphold the integrity of the electoral process. These regulations define electoral conduct, set ethical standards for candidates, political parties, and election officials while prohibiting malpractices such as bribery, voter intimidation, and misuse of government resources. They ensure inclusivity by safeguarding the rights of all eligible citizens to participate without discrimination and regulate campaign financing to promote transparency and accountability, preventing undue influence from wealthy entities. Additionally, legal frameworks monitor media conduct to ensure impartial reporting and restrict misinformation, while also mandating measures for election transparency, such as the proper functioning of voting machines and voter lists. Mechanisms to address electoral grievances and disputes further enhance the credibility of the process. By protecting voter privacy and maintaining the sanctity of secret ballots, legal regulations further uphold democratic principles, foster public trust, and ensure that elections genuinely reflect the will of the people.

Having said so, the present note is an attempt to critically examine the legal framework that governs elections in India and explore the functional challenges that arise within the electoral process. The analysis involves an in-depth review of the constitutional provisions, laws, and regulations surrounding elections, focusing on their impact on the fairness, transparency, and efficiency of the electoral system. Additionally, the note addresses key issues such as voter registration, electoral integrity, election administration, the role of the Election Commission, and the influence of money and corruption on the electoral process. The ultimate objective would be to offer suggestions to reform and strengthen the legal framework and ensure a more robust electoral system in India.

## **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ELECTION LAWS IN INDIA**

India's journey towards a having a strong electoral system is a clear testimony to its adherence to democratic values and the necessity of adapting to its unique socio-political and cultural diversity. The development of electoral laws in India can broadly be put into two phases: the pre-independence period, which laid the base for representative governance under colonial rule, and the post-independence period, with the development and strengthening of democratic institutions. From restricted voting rights based on property and educational qualifications under British rule to the establishment of universal adult suffrage and the progressive reforms after attaining independence, India's electoral system has been shaped by the changing aspirations of its people.

These historical milestones not only trace the country's journey to democracy but also outline its ongoing efforts to improve electoral practices in order to make them inclusive, transparent, and fair in the functioning of a democratic process.

### **1(i) Pre Independence:**

India's electoral laws have undergone significant evolution since independence, reflecting the nation's commitment to democratic principles and the need to adapt to changing circumstances. The Government of India Act, 1919 introduced limited franchise based on property and education, allowing a small segment of the population to vote.<sup>1</sup> The Government of India Act, 1935 expanded the electorate and introduced provincial autonomy, though voting rights remained restricted<sup>2</sup>. With the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950, universal adult suffrage was established, granting voting rights to all citizens aged 21 and above<sup>3</sup>, irrespective of gender, caste, or religion<sup>4</sup>. The Representation of the People Act, 1950 provided for the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections, while the Representation of the People Act, 1951 detailed the conduct of elections, qualifications of voters and candidates, and grounds for disqualification.

### **1(ii) Post Independence:**

Subsequent amendments and reforms have further refined the electoral system, including the

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<sup>1</sup> S. 41 of The Government of India Act, 1919

<sup>2</sup> S 45 of The Government of India Act, 1935

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution (Sixty-first Amendment) Act, 1988 lowered the voting age from 21 years to 18 years, reinforcing the principle of universal adult suffrage.

<sup>4</sup> Article 326 of the Indian Constitution



Constitution (Sixty-first Amendment) Act 1988, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 years, and the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) to enhance the efficiency and transparency of the voting process. The implementation of the Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail<sup>5</sup> (VVPAT) system allowed voters to verify their votes, strengthening the credibility of elections. Initiatives like the Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) program have been launched to increase voter awareness and participation. The introduction of the None of the Above (NOTA) option enabled voters to reject all candidates in an election, and the provision for proxy voting for Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) facilitated their participation in the electoral process. Additionally, the establishment of the Model Code of Conduct has ensured free and fair elections by regulating the conduct of political parties and candidates during the election period. Measures like Electoral Expenditure Monitoring, including the deployment of flying squads and surveillance teams, have been set up to monitor election expenditure of candidates during the election. These developments underscore India's ongoing efforts to refine its electoral system, ensuring it remains inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the needs of its diverse population.

## **2. ISSUES AND CONCERNS IN INDIA**

Elections form the cornerstone of democratic governance, offering citizens the power to shape the political landscape of their nation. However, the electoral process is fraught with numerous functional challenges that undermine its integrity and effectiveness. These issues encompass voter-related challenges, financial transparency, technological misuse, and emerging concerns surrounding social media and electoral malpractices.

**2(i) Voter-related issues-** such as inaccuracies in electoral rolls and low voter turnout, particularly in urban areas, highlight the need for enhanced engagement and robust roll management. Similarly, election expenditure and funding remain critical concerns due to the pervasive influence of black money, lack of financial transparency, and challenges in enforcing campaign expenditure limits. Another prominent challenge is voter apathy and low turnout, particularly in urban areas. Urban voters often exhibit less enthusiasm for participating in elections due to various reasons, including a lack of awareness, disillusionment with political inefficiency, and the belief that their vote holds little significance. Logistical barriers such as long working hours, fast-paced lifestyles, and complications related to migration also

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<sup>5</sup> Introduction of VVPAT by the Election Commission of India, 2013 enhanced voter confidence.

discourage urban residents from voting. Furthermore, political parties tend to focus more on rural constituencies, neglecting effective engagement strategies for urban voters. This apathy results in skewed representation, with smaller, more active voter groups disproportionately influencing urban electoral outcomes.

**2(ii) Technological concerns and traditional malpractices-** The integration of technology, while intended to streamline elections, has introduced its own set of problems, including doubts over the reliability of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)<sup>6</sup> and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs)<sup>7</sup>, as well as cybersecurity threats in digital election processes. Additionally, traditional malpractices such as paid news, media bias, misuse of government machinery, violence, and bribery continue to erode public trust in the democratic process.

**2(iii) Social Media and misinformation-** In recent years, the role of social media has become a double-edged sword in elections. While it facilitates broader engagement, it also enables the rapid spread of misinformation, hate speech, and unethical campaign practices, compounded by insufficient regulatory oversight. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is essential to ensure free, fair, and credible elections that uphold democratic values.

**2(iv) Issue of inclusivity-** Voter-related challenges in India significantly impact the democratic process, particularly in terms of inclusivity and fairness. A major issue lies in errors in electoral rolls, which can be categorized into inclusion and exclusion issues. Inclusion errors occur when ineligible individuals, such as deceased persons or duplicate entries, are included in the voter rolls, creating opportunities for fraud and impersonation. Exclusion issues, on the other hand, result in eligible voters being left out, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, women (especially post-marriage), and migrant workers. These errors often arise from outdated records, inadequate verification processes, and logistical inefficiencies, leading to voter disenfranchisement and reduced trust in the electoral system.

**2(v) Funding for election campaigns-** Another major concern is the effectiveness of limits on campaign expenditure. While statutory limits are imposed to ensure a level playing field, they are often circumvented. Candidates and parties frequently underreport their spending or

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<sup>6</sup> EVMs are stand-alone machines that use write once read many memory. They are self-contained, battery-powered and do not need any networking capability.

<sup>7</sup> Voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) or verified paper record (VPR) is a method of providing feedback to voters who use an electronic voting system.

channel funds through unofficial means, such as third-party entities, supporters, or indirect campaign methods like social media advertisements. Additionally, the limits set by the Election Commission often fail to reflect the actual costs of modern campaigns, which include extensive media outreach, rallies, and digital marketing. This disparity allows wealthier candidates and parties to gain an unfair advantage, exacerbating inequality in electoral contests. Election expenditure and funding are critical aspects of the electoral process, but they present significant challenges in India, particularly concerning transparency and regulation. One of the foremost issues is the pervasive role of black money in political financing. Despite efforts to introduce reforms, a significant portion of election funding remains unaccounted for, allowing illicit sources to influence elections.<sup>8</sup> This lack of transparency undermines public trust, skews the democratic process, and often leads to corrupt practices, as political parties and candidates may feel obligated to serve the interests of their undisclosed financiers rather than the electorate.

### **3. AN OVERALL ANALYSIS OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK** **GOVERNING ELECTIONS IN INDIA**

India's electoral process is underpinned by a comprehensive legal framework designed to ensure free and fair elections. The constitutional provisions, statutory laws, and regulatory guidelines collectively establish the structure and governance of elections.

Key constitutional provisions include Article 324<sup>9</sup>, which empowers the Election Commission of India (ECI) to oversee and conduct elections, Article 326, guaranteeing adult suffrage and the right to vote<sup>10</sup>, and Article 329<sup>11</sup>, which restricts judicial interference in electoral matters. The Constitution grants extensive powers to the Election Commission of India (ECI), a constitutional body entrusted with the superintendence, direction, and control of elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President<sup>12</sup>. This

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<sup>8</sup> Dinesh Trivedi, MP v. Union of India, (1997) 4 SCC 306 highlighted the concerns over unregulated electoral funding and corruption.

<sup>9</sup> Article 324 of the Indian Constitution- Superintendence, direction, and control of elections to be vested in an Election Commission.

<sup>10</sup> **Article 326 of the Indian Constitution- Elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assemblies of State elects to be on the basis of adult suffrage.**

<sup>11</sup> *Bar to interference by courts in electoral matters*

*Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution, a. the validity of any law relating to the delimitation of constituencies or the allotment of seats to such constituencies, made or purporting to be made under article 327 or article 328, shall not be called in question in any court; b. no election to either House of Parliament or to the House or either House of the Legislature of a State shall be called in question except by an election petition presented to such authority and in such manner as may be provided for by or under any law made by the appropriate Legislature.*

<sup>12</sup> Article 324 of the Constitution governs the powers and responsibilities of Election Commission of India.

Article empowers the ECI to take necessary measures to ensure free and fair elections<sup>13</sup>, including preparing and updating electoral rolls, monitoring the conduct of political parties and candidates, and enforcing election laws and guidelines. The ECI also has quasi-judicial powers to resolve disputes related to elections, such as allotment of symbols or disqualification of candidates, making it the guardian of the electoral process.<sup>14</sup> The Constitution also enshrines the principle of universal adult suffrage<sup>15</sup>. Additionally, it also bars judicial interference during the electoral process thereby acting as a protective shield for the sanctity and continuity of elections<sup>16</sup>.

The legal framework for elections in India is significantly shaped by the **Representation of the People Acts of 1950 and 1951**<sup>17</sup> and the **Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968**, which collectively address key aspects of electoral administration and governance.

The **Representation of the People Act, 1950**, primarily focuses on the preparation and maintenance of electoral rolls and the delimitation of constituencies. It ensures that every eligible citizen is registered to vote by prescribing the process for compiling and revising electoral rolls, enabling universal adult suffrage. This Act also outlines the territorial distribution of parliamentary and legislative constituencies, ensuring proportional representation based on population. Delimitation ensures balanced voter representation and prevents discrepancies, such as overrepresentation or underrepresentation in certain areas. The Act plays a crucial role in determining the electorate structure and promoting equitable representation in India's pluralistic society.<sup>18</sup>

The **Representation of the People Act, 1951**, on the other hand, governs the conduct of elections, qualifications and disqualifications of candidates, and mechanisms for addressing

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<sup>13</sup> Mohinder Singh Gill v. The Chief Election Commissioner, (1978) 2 S.C.R. 272 clarified the plenary powers of the Election Commission under Art. 324 of the Indian Constitution.

<sup>14</sup> Election Commission of India v. Dr. Subramaniam Swamy, (1996) 4 SCC 104 clarified the quasi-judicial powers of the Election Commission

<sup>15</sup> Article 326 of the Indian Constitution ensures universal adult suffrage, granting voting rights to all citizens aged 18 and above.

<sup>16</sup> Article 329 of the Indian Constitution prohibits interference by courts in electoral matters during the election process.

<sup>17</sup> Representation of People Act's 1950 and 1951 outlines the preparation of electoral rolls and conduct of elections in India.

<sup>18</sup> A pluralistic society is a society that accepts and embraces diversity in its people, their values, religions, social groups, and political powers. In a pluralistic society, different groups are able to develop freely and participate in the political process equally.

electoral disputes. It lays down detailed procedures for filing nominations, scrutinizing candidates, and conducting free and fair polling. The Act also specifies eligibility criteria for candidates contesting elections and grounds for disqualification, such as holding an office of profit, insolvency, criminal convictions, or corrupt practices<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, it provides a mechanism for filing election petitions to challenge the validity of elections, thereby upholding the integrity of the democratic process. This Act is central to the transparent and accountable functioning of electoral systems in India.

The **Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968**, issued by the Election Commission of India, provides guidelines for the allocation of symbols to political parties and independent candidates.<sup>20</sup> It categorizes symbols into "reserved" and "free" categories, where reserved symbols are allotted exclusively to recognized national and state parties, and free symbols are made available to unrecognized parties and independent candidates. This order ensures clarity and uniformity in the identification of political parties and candidates on ballot papers and Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), thus simplifying the voting process for the electorate. It also prevents confusion or duplication of symbols, thereby safeguarding the interests of political parties and maintaining voter trust.

Together, these legislative measures and orders provide a robust framework for managing India's complex electoral process, ensuring inclusivity, fairness, and efficiency in the world's largest democracy.

### **Rules and Guidelines:**

The Rules and Guidelines governing elections in India play a critical role in ensuring transparency, fairness, and accountability in the electoral process. These include the **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)** and legal provisions for regulating election funding and expenditure.

The **Model Code of Conduct (MCC)**<sup>21</sup> is a set of guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India (hereinafter referred to as ECI for brevity) to regulate the behaviour of

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<sup>19</sup> Lily Thomas v. Union of India, (2013) 7 SCC 653 made disqualification mandatory for convicted legislators, even during appeal.

<sup>20</sup> Sadiq Ali v. Election Commission of India, (1972) 4 SCC 664, addressed and clarified conflicts regarding party symbols as outlined in the Election Symbols Orders of 1968.

<sup>21</sup> Election Commission of India - Model Code of Conduct (MCC) - <https://www.eci.gov.in/mcc/>



political parties, candidates, and government officials during elections<sup>22</sup>. Although not legally enforceable, the MCC carries significant moral and institutional weight. It comes into effect from the announcement of the election schedule and remains in force until the election process concludes. The MCC ensures a level playing field by prohibiting practices such as using government resources for election campaigns, offering bribes or inducements to voters, or making communal or inflammatory appeals. It also restrains the ruling government from announcing new schemes, policies, or projects that could influence voter behavior<sup>23</sup>. The MCC is instrumental in maintaining decorum and ethical conduct during elections, and the ECI closely monitors compliance, issuing advisories or taking punitive action for violations.

Election laws for funding and expenditure monitoring are critical for ensuring financial transparency and preventing undue influence in the electoral process. The Representation of the People Act, 1951, along with other guidelines issued by the ECI, sets limits on the amount a candidate can spend during elections, varying by the type of election and constituency. Candidates are required to maintain detailed accounts of their election expenses and submit them to the ECI within a stipulated timeframe. The ECI has the authority to scrutinize these accounts and take action for any discrepancies or violations, which can include disqualification of the candidate.

Additionally, political parties are required to disclose their sources of funding and submit annual financial reports to ensure accountability<sup>24</sup>. Contributions exceeding ₹20,000 must be reported to the ECI, and anonymous donations are capped at ₹2,000 to curb unaccounted cash inflows. Measures such as the introduction of electoral bonds provide an alternative mechanism for transparent funding while maintaining donor anonymity.

Together, the MCC and election expenditure monitoring laws help maintain the integrity of the electoral process by fostering ethical behaviour, limiting undue influence, and promoting financial transparency, thereby safeguarding the democratic values of fairness and equality.

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<sup>22</sup> Introduction of the Model Code of Conduct by the election Commission of India, 1968 ensured fairness during elections.

<sup>23</sup> S. Subramaniam Balaji v. State of T.N, (2013) 9 SCC 659, discussed the implications of election freebies and voter inducement on fair elections.

#### **4. VERDICTS RELATED TO ELECTIONS IN INDIA**

India's judiciary has played a pivotal role in fortifying the nation's democratic framework through several landmark judgments that have enhanced the electoral process. These decisions have addressed various aspects, including the fundamental right to vote, transparency, inclusive representation, dispute resolution, and the protection of electoral rights.

##### **4(i) Right to Vote as a Fundamental Right**

In the case of *Mohinder Singh Gill v. The Chief Election Commissioner*<sup>25</sup> in 1977, the Supreme Court of India declared that the right to vote is a basic right. The court found that any arbitrary deprivation of this right is unconstitutional; therefore, the right to vote is irrevocable, and lays the basis for inclusive and participatory elections in India.

##### **4(ii) Electoral Reforms and Transparency**

The landmark case of *Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India*<sup>26</sup> in 2002 marked a significant milestone in promoting transparency within the electoral process. The Supreme Court upheld the High Court's ruling that mandated candidates contesting elections to disclose information related to their education, criminal antecedents, financial assets, and liabilities. This judgment empowered voters with crucial information, fostering greater accountability among political candidates.

##### **4(iii) Inclusive Representation and Minority Rights**

In 1991, in the Mandal Commission case popularly known as *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*<sup>27</sup>, the Supreme Court affirmed the provision for setting aside seats to socially and educationally backward classes in government service and institutions. This was one of the very strong verdicts, in which the Indian judiciary committed to inclusive representation in order to enable the deprived to participate and enhance social justice through the electoral process.

##### **4(iv) Resolution of Election Disputes**

In the 2018 case of *Lok Prahari vs. Election Commission of India*<sup>28</sup>, the Supreme Court was

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<sup>25</sup> (1978) 2 S.C.R. 272

<sup>26</sup> (2002) 5 SCC 294

<sup>27</sup> AIR 1993 SC 477

<sup>28</sup> (2018) 18 SCC 114

urging a quick resolution to disputes related to elections. In such matters, the Court considered timely justice with a rule of law as most crucial for strengthening the credibility of the electoral process and ensuring speedy and impartial resolutions to disputes.

These landmark judgments have strengthened India's electoral democracy by ensuring that elections are conducted with fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness while ensuring the protection of fundamental rights.

## **5. MITIGATING FACTORS IN ELECTIONS IN INDIA**

Elections in India are governed by a constitutional and legal framework aimed at ensuring free, fair, and transparent democratic processes. However, electoral malpractices such as corruption, criminalization of politics, voter suppression, and misinformation pose significant challenges. The judiciary, Election Commission of India (ECI), and statutory provisions play a crucial role in mitigating these risks.

### **5(i) Candidate Disclosure of Criminal and Financial Background:**

The Supreme Court, in *Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India (2002)*<sup>29</sup>, mandated that candidates must declare their criminal records, assets, liabilities, and educational qualifications. This ensures voter awareness and discourages the entry of criminals into politics. Despite this, issues persist due to the increasing number of candidates with pending criminal cases.<sup>30</sup>

### **5(ii) NOTA (None of the Above) as a Democratic Safeguard:**

In *PUCI v. Union of India (2013)*<sup>31</sup>, the Supreme Court upheld voters' right to reject all candidates through the NOTA (None of the Above) option. This ruling strengthened electoral accountability by compelling political parties to field competent candidates.

### **5(iii) Restrictions on Hate Speech and Misinformation**

Section 123(3) of the RPA prohibits communal and caste-based appeals for votes. In *Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen*<sup>32</sup>, the Supreme Court ruled that seeking votes based on religion,

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<sup>29</sup> Supra

<sup>30</sup> Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India, 2019 (3) SCC 224, directed the candidates to fill out the election commission form completely disclosing any criminal history.

<sup>31</sup> Writ Petition (Civil) No. 161 OF 2004

<sup>32</sup> 1996 SCC (3) 665

caste, or community is unconstitutional. The ECI also monitors social media platforms to curb misinformation campaigns and deepfake content.

#### 5(iv) Election Expenditure Limits

The ECI imposes expenditure ceilings on candidates to prevent money power from influencing elections.<sup>33</sup> As per the latest guidelines, the limit is ₹95 lakh for Lok Sabha elections ₹40 lakh for Assembly elections. However, political parties remain exempt from such limits, leading to concerns over undue financial influence.

#### 5(v) Electoral Bonds and Political Funding Transparency

The Electoral Bond Scheme (2018) was introduced to regulate anonymous donations to political parties. However, legal challenges have been raised regarding lack of transparency and potential misuse. On February 15, 2024, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark judgment in *Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India*<sup>34</sup>, declaring the Electoral Bond Scheme unconstitutional. The Court held that the scheme violated voters' right to information, as it allowed anonymous donations to political parties, thereby undermining transparency and accountability in political funding.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the role of social media in elections is both transformative and fraught with challenges. While social media has revolutionized political engagement, offering platforms for dialogue, mobilization, and awareness, its misuse during elections poses significant risks to the integrity of democratic processes. The unchecked spread of misinformation and hate speech can mislead voters, deepen societal divides, and create an environment of distrust in the electoral system. Political campaigns often exploit the unregulated nature of these platforms, leveraging targeted advertisements and algorithmic amplification to manipulate public opinion, bypass transparency, and undermine the fairness of elections.

The current regulatory framework for social media is inadequate to address these evolving threats. Unlike traditional media, social media operates in a less governed space, allowing unethical practices such as microtargeting and the dissemination of false narratives to flourish

<sup>33</sup> Common Cause v. Union of India, (1996) 2 SCC 752, emphasized the necessity for stringent auditing and the establishment of limits on election expenditure.

<sup>34</sup> [2021] 2 SCR 851 Writ Petition (Civil) No 880 of 2017

with minimal accountability. This gap in oversight has enabled malicious actors to exploit vulnerabilities, eroding public trust in the democratic process.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged strategy. First, governments must enact comprehensive regulations that hold platforms accountable for content moderation, misinformation, and hate speech. This includes mandatory disclosure of political advertisements, stricter penalties for non-compliance, and greater transparency in the use of algorithms. Second, social media companies need to strengthen their mechanisms for detecting and countering misinformation through advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and human moderation. They must also provide clearer avenues for users to report and rectify false or harmful content. Third, public awareness campaigns should focus on enhancing digital literacy, empowering voters to critically evaluate online content and recognize propaganda or fake news.

Ultimately, the ethical use of social media in elections is a shared responsibility involving governments, social media platforms, political parties, and citizens. By fostering greater accountability, promoting transparency, and encouraging informed participation, social media can evolve into a constructive force that enhances democratic discourse rather than undermines it. Strengthening these safeguards is critical to preserving the credibility of elections and ensuring that social media serves as a tool for empowerment, inclusion, and the promotion of democratic values.

## 7. SUGGESTIONS:

**7(i) Strengthening Electoral Rolls:** To address these challenges, measures must be implemented to enhance voter inclusion and engagement. Regular updates to electoral rolls, improved ground-level verification, and the use of technology such as AI and Aadhaar linkage (with appropriate data privacy measures) can help mitigate errors in voter lists. Simultaneously, awareness campaigns targeting urban populations, online voter services, and exploring alternative voting mechanisms, such as remote or online voting, can improve turnout and participation. By addressing these voter-related challenges, India can strengthen its democratic framework and ensure more inclusive and equitable elections.

**7(ii) Enhancing Financial Transparency-** To address these challenges, robust reforms are needed. Enhancing the transparency of political funding can be achieved by mandating greater



disclosure of sources and introducing stricter penalties for non-compliance. Mechanisms like electoral bonds, though introduced to address these issues, require further refinement to ensure accountability. Simultaneously, enforcement of campaign expenditure limits should be strengthened, with better monitoring mechanisms, the use of technology to track spending, and periodic audits of candidate finances. Addressing these issues is vital to ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections, thereby upholding the integrity of India's democratic system.

**7(iii) Addressing Technological Risks-** The misuse of technology in elections is a growing concern, particularly with the increasing reliance on digital systems to enhance efficiency and transparency. One key challenge is the use of **Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)** and **Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)**. While EVMs have simplified the voting process and reduced issues like invalid or fake votes, they have faced criticism regarding their vulnerability to tampering and lack of transparency. Allegations of EVM malfunction and manipulation often arise, leading to skepticism among voters and political parties. Although the Election Commission of India introduced VVPATs to enhance voter confidence and ensure accountability, the system is not without challenges. Limited random verification of VVPAT slips raises doubts about its effectiveness in detecting discrepancies, and logistical issues like maintaining and transporting VVPAT units add complexity to the electoral process.

**7(iv) Regulation of digital platforms-** Another significant concern is the rise of cybersecurity threats in digital election processes. As elections become increasingly digitalized, with the use of online voter registration, digital campaigning, and electronic data storage, the risk of cyberattacks grows. Threats such as hacking, phishing, and data breaches could compromise sensitive voter information or disrupt election infrastructure. Additionally, the spread of misinformation and fake news through digital platforms can manipulate voter opinions and undermine the credibility of the electoral process. The lack of robust cybersecurity measures in some areas leaves election systems vulnerable to both domestic and foreign interference. The inadequacy of regulations for online platforms, unlike traditional media, which is subject to stricter oversight, social media operates in a relatively unregulated space. Current election laws often fail to address the unique challenges posed by digital platforms, such as real-time content dissemination, targeted advertising, and the use of algorithms to amplify specific narratives. The lack of robust guidelines allows misuse by political actors who exploit these platforms for unethical practices like microtargeting voters based on sensitive data, deploying bots to manipulate public opinion, and bypassing campaign spending limits. While some

platforms have introduced voluntary measures like fact-checking and content moderation, these efforts are inconsistent and often fall short in effectively countering misuse.

**7(v) Social media Regulation in terms of fake information and hate speech** - The role of social media in elections has become a double-edged sword, offering opportunities for political engagement while presenting serious challenges to the integrity of the democratic process. A significant concern is the spread of misinformation and hate speech during campaigns. Social media platforms are often used to disseminate fake news, manipulated content, and propaganda, which can mislead voters and polarize public opinion. False narratives about candidates, parties, or electoral processes undermine informed decision-making and erode trust in the democratic system. Moreover, the prevalence of hate speech amplifies societal divisions, often inciting communal tensions and violence during sensitive election periods. The anonymity offered by these platforms makes it easier for malicious actors to propagate divisive content without accountability.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach. For EVMs and VVPATs, enhancing transparency through broader VVPAT slip audits, ensuring regular third-party testing of machines, and public demonstrations of their reliability can build trust. In terms of cybersecurity, implementing stringent data protection laws, improving election infrastructure resilience, and conducting regular security audits are crucial. Collaborating with technology experts and educating stakeholders about digital risks can further safeguard the integrity of elections. Tackling these challenges is essential to maintaining public trust and ensuring the credibility of India's democratic processes in an increasingly digital age.

To address these challenges, comprehensive reforms are necessary. Strengthening regulations for social media during elections can include mandatory disclosure of political advertisements, stricter penalties for spreading fake news or hate speech, and clear accountability mechanisms for platforms. Collaborating with technology companies to improve content moderation and promote transparency in algorithms is equally crucial. Public awareness campaigns to educate voters about identifying misinformation and encouraging digital literacy can also help mitigate the impact of false narratives. Ensuring the ethical use of social media is vital to preserving the integrity of elections and fostering a healthier democratic discourse.