

Pathways for Electoral Reforms in India

Abstract

India, the world's largest democracy, holds elections after every five years. Free and fair elections are essential for the survival and credibility of any democratic setup. However, the Indian electoral system faces persistent challenges such as increased use of money power, criminalisation of politics, misuse of government machinery, and lack of transparency in political funding. These issues have raised serious concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of the electoral process. This essay explores the present shortcomings of India's electoral system and discusses possible pathways for reform, including state funding of elections, strengthening of the Election Commission, digitisation, and better voter awareness. Further, it highlights how effective electoral reforms can enhance democracy in our country and ensure that governance truly reflects the will of the people. Strengthening India's democracy depends not only on periodic elections but also on ensuring that those elections remain transparent, inclusive, and representative of the nation's diverse voices.

Keywords: Electoral reform, democracy, transparency, political funding.

Introduction

Elections are the lifeline of democracy. They allow the citizens to choose their representatives. Since independence, India has developed an extensive electoral system that has managed to hold free and fair elections even under challenging conditions. Yet, the credibility of this system is increasingly being questioned. Issues such as rising election expenditure, opaque political donations, voter manipulation, and misuse of social media platforms have become a growing concern. Electoral reforms are therefore not only necessary but urgent for strengthening India's democratic framework.

Historical Background

India's electoral process is governed mainly by the Constitution, and various orders issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI). Over the decades, several committees, such as the Tarkunde Committee, Goswami Committee, and the Law Commission's

255th Report, have made important recommendations to improve the system. While some reforms—like the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), NOTA, and limits on election expenditure—have been implemented, many improvements still need to be done.

Challenges in the Current Electoral System

1. Money Power and Political Funding

The growing influence of money in elections has become a serious threat to democracy. Candidates often spend far more than the legal expenditure limits. Political parties receive large donations through opaque channels, which raise questions about accountability.

2. Criminalisation of Politics

A significant number of legislators face serious criminal charges. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), over 40% of sitting Members of Parliament have criminal cases against them. This undermines public trust in the electoral process and weakens the moral authority of the legislature.

3. Misuse of Government Machinery

Incumbent political parties are often accused of using government resources for their electoral gains. Like, for example—some Member of Parliament using government transportation for the purpose of travelling during election campaigning.

4. Voter Awareness and Turnout

Despite progress, many voters—especially in rural and marginalised communities—remain unaware of their electoral rights. Urban apathy also contributes to lower voter turnout. This urban apathy is, in turn, majorly because of the increasing problems with the electoral system.

5. Technology and Fake News

The rise of social media has created a new challenge in the form of misinformation and also creating propaganda against a certain person or political party, which can manipulate voter behaviour and also confuse them in their choices.

Pathways for Electoral Reforms

1. Transparency in Political Funding

One of the most important reforms is to make political funding fully transparent. Parties must be required to submit audited financial statements, and these should be accessible to citizens. Public scrutiny can act as a deterrent against corruption and undue influence by corporate donors. A good example of this is that electoral bonds were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India.

2. State Funding of Elections

Partial state funding could help reduce candidates' dependence on private donations. This could take the form of providing free airtime on public broadcasting, printing materials, or providing a part of campaign expenses. By reducing financial pressure on the candidates, it would allow honest and capable candidates to compete on an equal footing.

3. Disqualification of Candidates with Criminal Background

The law should be strengthened to bar individuals with serious criminal charges from contesting elections until they are cleared by the courts. This reform would restore the integrity of the legislature and encourage clean politics.

4. Empowering the Election Commission

The Election Commission of India should be given more autonomy in financial and administrative matters. Moreover, the ECI should have the power to take strict and swift action against electoral malpractice. A good example of empowering the ECI is that, the current selection committee for ECI is:

1. Prime Minister (Chairperson)
2. Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha
3. One Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM

5. Use of Technology for Greater Efficiency

Modern technology can make elections more transparent and accessible. The introduction of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) was a positive step, but more can be done—such as online registration, remote voting facilities for migrant workers, and stronger cybersecurity measures. Artificial intelligence can also be used to detect fake news.

6. Voter Education and Electoral Literacy

Reforms must go hand in hand with civic education. Schools and universities should promote voter awareness and teach students about the importance of informed participation. The Election Commission's SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) programme should be expanded to cover both rural and digital platforms.

7. Internal Democracy within Political Parties

Political parties should practise democracy within their own structures. Regular internal elections, transparent candidate selection, and accountability in party functioning are essential for a healthy political culture. Without parties reforming themselves, electoral reforms will remain incomplete.

These measures would ensure fairness, accountability, and representativeness in elections.

Strengthening India's Democratic Framework

True democracy is not just about casting a vote—it is about ensuring that the electoral process reflects the people's real choices. Strengthening India's democracy requires reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness. Reforms can help revive public faith in institutions and make governance more representative.

Conclusion

India's democratic journey has been inspiring, but it now stands at a crossroads. Electoral reforms are essential to safeguard the purity of elections and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. A system that allows money power, criminal influence, and opacity to

dominate, cannot truly represent the will of the people. By strengthening institutions like the Election Commission, ensuring transparency in political funding, and encouraging active civic participation, India can build a more accountable, inclusive and vibrant democracy.

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