

# PATHWAYS TO ELECTORAL REFORMS IN INDIA

## Abstract

Elections hold the essence of democracy and manifest the will of the people. In India, the world's largest democracy, the fairness of the electoral process has been increasingly scrutinised for criminalisation in politics, electoral transparency, and opaque political funding. Therefore, electoral reforms must not only fix the loopholes but also rebuild faith in the system. From past reforms to recent judicial proceedings, efforts have been made to make elections more accountable. Further reforms, such as state funding of campaigns, digital transparency, and voter education, are some steps that can be taken to strengthen democracy. Apart from this, ensuring proper voter identification, regulating the spread of misinformation online and curbing populist promises can increase electoral integrity. India can also learn from global models to enhance its own transparency and equality in political opportunities. Electoral reforms need honesty, political will and active participation to ensure grassroots changes and implementation. Effective reforms depend on building frameworks that are strong enough to resist external manipulation and uphold the public trust. Ultimately, the electoral process does not end with the casting of votes by people; it is the stepping stone to ensure that every citizen believes that their choices matter and that their voices carry weight.

Keywords: Criminalisation in politics, voter identification, digital transparency.

## Introduction

Elections offer people an avenue to express their choices and mould the way they are governed. Electoral reforms involve steps to improve the laws and processes of conducting elections, including casting of votes, selecting and funding of candidates, counting of results, and governance practices. With over 96 crore registered voters, every election involves over 12 lakh polling stations and over 1.5 crore polling staff, making it a remarkable feat.<sup>1</sup> The fairness and transparency of the electoral process have been increasingly scrutinised for electoral malpractice, electoral bribery, and declining public trust. In these situations, every voter should

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<sup>1</sup> Press Information Bureau, *14th National Voters' Day Celebrated Across the Country with the Theme "Nothing Like Voting, I Vote for Sure"*, GOV'T OF INDIA (Jan. 25, 2024), <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspxPRID1999673> (accessed Oct. 29, 2025).

feel that their choice matters and parties must play by the same rules. Therefore, electoral reform is not just procedural; it also affects public trust in democracy.

## Historical Electoral Reforms in India:<sup>2</sup>

- Tarkunde Committee (1974) suggested state funding of elections for more transparency.
- Law Commission's 170th Report (1999) recommended regulation of party finances and inner-party democracy.
- The introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) modernised the voting system.

## Need for Electoral Reforms: Challenges in the Current System

The electoral bonds were meant to promote transparency in political funding, but led to **opaque funding**, and faced constitutional challenges before the Supreme Court for undermining the code of conduct for elections.

According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), 27% ministers in 2025 have serious criminal charges against them.<sup>3</sup> **Criminalisation of politics** creates a situation where lawbreakers become lawmakers. The lack of disqualifying provisions for them weakens accountability.

**Mobilisation of Vote** refers to the effort by candidates to secure votes by appealing to them based on race, religion, caste, and gender, leading to bias. The lack of strong voter education limits citizens' capacity to hold candidates accountable.

**Youth mobilisation** is a crucial challenge as youth have become disillusioned with the political system and recognise it to be unresponsive and untrustworthy. This disconnects the next generation from shaping the country further.

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<sup>2</sup> Law Commission of India, *Electoral Reforms*, LAW COMMISSION OF INDIA, [https://lawcommissionofindia.nic./cat\\_electoral\\_reforms/](https://lawcommissionofindia.nic./cat_electoral_reforms/) (accessed Oct. 28, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Association for Democratic Reforms & National Election Watch, *Analysis of Current Ministers from 27 States Assemblies, 3 Union Territories and the Union Council of Ministers 2025* (Sept. 4 2025), [https://adrindia.org/sites/default/Analysis\\_of\\_CurrentMinisters\\_and\\_the\\_Union\\_Council\\_of\\_Ministers\\_2025\\_FinalVer\\_English.pdf](https://adrindia.org/sites/default/Analysis_of_CurrentMinisters_and_the_Union_Council_of_Ministers_2025_FinalVer_English.pdf) (accessed Oct. 29 2025).

# Pathways to Electoral Reform in India

The following are the suggested electoral reforms:

## **State funding for election campaigning**

State funding would reduce the dependence of political parties on private donors, limiting the influence of the wealthy on political outcomes. Funding should be based on eligibility criteria such as a minimum threshold of votes, ethical standards, internal elections and gender representation; this report should also be released to the public.

## **Voter Identity Legitimacy**

Every vote can be linked to biometric or OTP-based authentication at polling stations and voters' identities can be confirmed using Aadhar Card or a fingerprint scan before casting their vote to ensure the integrity of the voting process.

## **Decriminalisation of Politics**

Legal reforms should disqualify candidates once charges are framed for serious offences punishable by five years or more for that election. Additionally, to comply with the doctrine of 'innocent until proven guilty', there should be an establishment of fast-track courts to adjudicate cases involving elected representatives within a year.

## **Regulating Digital Campaigning**

An independent board for digital news verification can certify election-related deepfakes, AI-generated content creations for manipulated narratives. The parties also need to disclose their influencer partnerships for political ads to increase reliability of digital information.

## **Controlling populism for a voter base**

Populist electoral promises, called "freebies," have distorted fair competition and placed pressure on public finances. Political parties should be mandated to present a clear fiscal roadmap outlining how they plan to fund these promises helping the voters decide their viability.

## **Accountability Mechanism**

Under this provision, if a significant share of the voters in a constituency files a complaint, regarding misuse of power, non-performance, or corruption by an elected representative, it

would trigger an investigation by the Election Commission of India<sup>4</sup> or an independent body after verifying the claims. Following the inquiry, a report card on the candidate's conduct should be published for public awareness.

### **Civic Literacy Programme**

National Civil Literacy Programmes should be integrated into schools, colleges, and digital learning platforms, as tests; an election literacy certification can be issued for first-time voters, which will show whether young voters understand the system, fake news risks, and ethics of elections.

### **Viability of the reforms**

The above reforms are neither easy to implement nor promise a flawless democracy. The stakeholders who would need to give up their advantages: political parties, wealthy donors, and influential candidates, may resist. Reforms require consensus, possible constitutional amendments, and honest political will. Vested political interests have limited the reform process, but history shows that change can occur through pressure from the public and judiciary. In the past, elected bodies have passed self-serving laws, but courts have overturned them to uphold democratic standards. When an informed voter base demands better governance, politicians face a stronger incentive to respond. Reforms should focus on achievable goals like better transparency and accountability, while keeping long-term systemic changes in view.

### **Current electoral reforms in progress**

- The Union Cabinet put forward the proposal for One Nation, One Election in 2024.
- The Supreme Court has abolished the electoral bonds scheme, taking a step towards transparency in funding processes. (*Association for Democratic Reforms v Union of India*, 2023).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Election Commission of India, *About ECI*, ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA, <https://www.ecigov>(accessed Oct. 28, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Assn. for Democratic Reforms (Electoral Bond Scheme) v. Union of India, (2024) 5 SCC 1

- Union Government has sought to pass the bill of Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, or the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, making 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha mandatory.

### Learning from foreign countries:

- South Korea and Japan feature transparent campaign-funding disclosures, spending caps, and strong independent election commissions, offering models for India's finance reforms.
- In Japan, citizens can directly initiate and vote on reforms, bypassing politicians entirely.
- In Germany, parties receive state funding based on their vote share in the recent elections.<sup>6</sup>

### Conclusion

Electoral reform in India is not just about refining rules; it is about restoring citizens' faith in the democratic process. For India to remain the largest democracy in spirit and not just in scale, it must continue to improve its electoral processes. Each step forward is a reaffirmation that Indian citizens, not monetary interests or elites, remain at the heart of the democracy.

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<sup>6</sup> Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, Germany (n.d.) *Funding of Political Parties*. *Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat*. Available at: <https://www.bmi.bundEN//constitution/law-political-parties/funding-pol-parties/funding-pol-parties-nodehtml> (accessed: 29 October 2025).

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