Reimagining Electoral Democracy in India: Structural Fault-Lines, Political Economy, and Pathways of Reform

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Abstract: India conducts the largest regular democratic exercise on the planet, yet the translation of votes into legitimate, accountable representation remains deeply contested. Drawing on primary constitutional provisions, Election Commission of India (ECI) documentation, and a close reading of recent scholarship—including Bhat et al.'s 2022 audit of the system—this paper offers a holistic reassessment of India's electoral architecture. It situates contemporary problems such as money and muscle power, criminalization of politics, representational distortions, and administrative lapses within a broader historical and comparative framework. The study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology supplemented by illustrative quantitative snapshots (e.g., the escalation of candidate assets and criminal indictments). It argues that India's first-past-the-post (FPTP) model, designed for a very different socio-political context, is now over-burdened by the demographic complexity and partisan fragmentation of the twenty-first century. The paper concludes with a reform agenda that favors a two-round majoritarian threshold, state-funded campaign vouchers, a permanent professional electoral service, and time-bound judicial processes for candidate cases. These proposals, it contends, are essential if India is to realize the full democratic promise implicit in Articles 324–329 of its Constitution.

KEYWORDS

India; Electoral System; Election Commission of India; Money Power; Criminalization of Politics; Electoral Reform; Comparative Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Constitution describes the republic as "sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic" and vests ultimate authority in "We, the People." Electoral competition is the primary instrument through which this sovereignty is renewed. Yet recurring controversies—from allegations of vote-buying to dramatic swings powered by narrow pluralities—have repeatedly exposed dissonance between constitutional ideals and electoral practice.

Since the adoption of universal adult franchise in 1951, the logistical scale of Indian elections has grown exponentially. In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, nearly 970 million citizens were eligible to vote, serviced by more than one million polling stations. Such scale is often celebrated as evidence of democratic vibrancy, but aggregate turnout masks persistent exclusions, administrative errors, and the corrosive influence of money and muscle. The present paper revisits these structural weaknesses, weaving them into a single analytical narrative with an explicit reform orientation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early analyses cast the Indian electoral arrangement as a stabilizing tool for a heterogeneous post-colonial polity (Kothari 1964; Rao 2004). By the 1990s, Yadav (1999) famously identified a "third electoral system" characterized by competitive fragmentation and social mobilization beyond the Congress coalition hegemony. Scholars such as Chhokar (2003) and Singh (2013) shifted the debate toward institutional reforms—public funding, inner-party democracy, and tighter expenditure audits.

Bhat, Dar and Shairgojri's 2022 article marks one of the most comprehensive recent audits, documenting how FPTP amplifies caste-communal cleavages, encourages non-serious candidatures, and facilitates the ascent of criminally indicted elites. Their findings reinforce ADR data showing that the share of Lok Sabha MPs facing serious criminal charges rose from 24 percent in 2004 to 34 percent in 2019. Parallel comparative literature by Reynolds, Reilly and Ellis (2008) situates India within a global conversation on mixed-member and run-off models capable of enhancing proportionality and legitimacy.

Despite dozens of official committees—from Tarkunde (1975) to the Law Commission (2015)—implementation has remained piecemeal. The persistence of the same dysfunctions across successive electoral cycles underscores a policy-implementation gap that this paper also interrogates.

3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The principal objectives are fourfold:

To map the constitutional-institutional framework governing Indian elections.

To diagnose the principal dysfunctions that undermines democratic legitimacy.

To juxtapose Indian practices with global electoral engineering lessons.

To craft a coherent reform menu grounded in empirical realities.

Methodologically, the study is descriptive-analytical, relying on secondary literature, statutory texts, ECI handbooks, and the compiled evidence provided by Bhat et al. (2022). Select quantitative indicators (e.g., candidate wealth, criminal cases) are used illustratively rather than exhaustively.

4. CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Articles 324–329 of the Constitution establish the ECI as an autonomous body charged with the "superintendence, direction and control" of elections. The Commission presently comprises a Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners appointed for six-year terms, removable only through parliamentary impeachment.

The Indian electoral framework is a hybrid: direct territorial elections (FPTP) for Lok Sabha and state assemblies, supplemented by proportional representation via single transferable vote for the Rajya Sabha and Legislative Councils. At field level, the ECI depends on state bureaucrats and ad-hoc staff—often exceeding five million personnel during general elections—to conduct polls.

While this apparatus has delivered polling at regular five-year intervals, its dependence on state machinery and political executives introduces vulnerabilities: delayed disciplinary action against erring officials, partisan transfers, and logistical unevenness across regions.

5. EMPIRICAL DIAGNOSES OF KEY CHALLENGES

5.1 PLURALITY DISTORTION

In a typical constituency, a candidate may win with barely 30–35 percent of valid votes—a democratic deficit pointed out repeatedly since the first general election. The result is legislative majorities that do not necessarily represent societal majorities, fuelling perceptions of illegitimacy and incentivizing polarizing campaigns.

5.2 MONEY POWER

Escalating campaign costs have converted elections into high-stakes financial contests. Bhat et al. report that 80 percent of the 16th Lok Sabha members were crorepatis, a dramatic jump from 30 percent in 2004. Corporate donations, opaque electoral bonds, and quid-pro-quo regulatory favors deepen the nexus between capital and policy.

5.3 MUSCLE POWER AND VIOLENCE

Booth-capture and intimidation, once associated largely with parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, are now documented even in southern states, signaling the spread of muscular tactics. The integration of local power brokers into party hierarchies legitimizes coercive tactics, discourages voter participation in marginalized communities, and undermines the principles of the rule of law.

5.4 CRIMINALIZATION OF POLITICS

According to ADR, 34 percent of current MPs face criminal cases, many for offences that carry potential sentences exceeding five years. Slow trials allow indicted politicians to continue contesting elections, often arguing that charges are "politically motivated."

5.5 COMMUNALISM AND CASTEISM

Majority-vote runoff systems, scholars suggest, could compel candidates to seek broader support coalitions, reducing sectarian appeals .

5.6 ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNOLOGICAL LAPSES

Large-scale deletions from electoral rolls, sometimes intentional, impede the voting rights of migratory workers and marginalised groups . While ECI has piloted blockchain-based remote voting, adoption remains limited.

5.7 MISUSE OF GOVERNMENT MACHINERY

The incumbency advantage is magnified through taxpayer-funded advertising blitzes, discretionary grant disbursals, and the use of official vehicles during campaigns . Although the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) seeks to curb such abuse, its enforcement relies on moral suasion rather than statutory penalties.

5.8 PAID NEWS AND DIGITAL DISINFORMATION

Traditional "paid news" has mutated into sophisticated social-media manipulation, with micro-targeted advertisements escaping conventional expenditure caps. The lack of real-time disclosure laws hampers regulatory response.

5.9 COALITION INSTABILITY AND DEFECTIONS

Post-poll alliances assembled purely for power sharing breed policy incoherence. Opportunistic defections—though moderated by the Tenth Schedule—continue at the state level, eroding voter trust .

6. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

Globally, democracies have experimented with institutional tweaks to remedy similar problems. France's two-round presidential and legislative polls ensure that eventual victors command majority support. Germany and New Zealand employ mixed-member systems that blend local accountability with proportional fairness, mitigating distorted seat-vote ratios. Canada's

Elections Canada models real-time expense disclosure backed by statutory penalties. While India's scale and diversity present formidable adaptation challenges, these cases demonstrate that electoral design is neither static nor destiny.

7. REFORM AGENDA

Proposed Reform	Expected Impact	Implementation Pathway
Two-round majority threshold for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha seats	Reduces plurality distortion, compels coalition building across social cleavages	Amend the Representation of the People Act (RPA) to mandate run-offs where no candidate crosses 50 percent in the first round
State-funded Campaign Vouchers	Diminishes private money dependence; levels playing field for less-wealthy candidates	Pilot voucher system in one general election; finance through consolidated fund with expenditure cap
All-India Electoral Service	Provides dedicated, non-partisan cadre; reduces state-machinery interference	Create new civil-service branch under Article 312 via parliamentary resolution
Fast-track Courts for Candidate Cases	Addresses criminalisation by deciding cases within six months; disqualifies convicts swiftly	Establish special benches under the RPA with sunset review after five years
Unified, Aadhaar-verified National E-Roll with Blockchain Audit Trail	Eliminates duplicate and deleted entries; enhances voter confidence	Tripartite collaboration among ECI, UIDAI and NIC; phased rollout starting urban districts

Many of these suggestions echo those of the Goswami (1990) and Law Commission (2015) reports yet await adoption—a testament to entrenched political resistance.

8. DISCUSSION

Reform proposals often falter on twin hurdles: constitutional rigidity and political expediency. While a two-round system requires only statutory change, proportional representation would demand a constitutional amendment—a higher bar given federal party arithmetic. Equally crucial is citizen-level change: voter rejection of cash-for-votes and sectarian propaganda can catalyse elite compliance. Civil-society watchdogs and independent media, though under strain, remain vital allies of institutional reform.

9. CONCLUSION

India's electoral machinery has succeeded in guaranteeing periodic, large-scale participation, but participation alone cannot guarantee substantive representation. FPTP-induced plurality distortions, unchecked money-muscle nexus, and creeping criminalisation threaten to hollow out democratic legitimacy. Reinforcing the autonomy and capacity of the ECI, insulating campaigns from illicit finance, and recalibrating vote-to-seat translation mechanisms are urgently required. Ultimately, electoral integrity is not merely a technical-administrative challenge but a question of political will—among parties, candidates, and, most importantly, the electorate itself. Only a vigilant citizenry can ensure that procedural refinements translate into a truly representative republic.

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