Electoral Reforms for a New India: Democracy at 100 Years of Independence
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ABSTRACT:

India's journey through a century of independence has been deeply intertwined with the evolution of its democratic institutions and electoral mechanisms. Despite being the world's largest democracy, persistent structural, legal, and institutional challenges continue to undermine the integrity, inclusiveness, and credibility of India's electoral system. This paper examines the critical need for electoral reforms in the contemporary era, especially in the context of India's centenary of independence. Drawing on secondary sources, constitutional provisions, judicial pronouncements, and reports by commissions, this qualitative study outlines the major bottlenecks in India's electoral democracy, evaluates past reform efforts, and proposes a roadmap for future change. Key findings suggest that strengthening institutional autonomy, enhancing transparency in political funding, synchronizing elections, adopting advanced technology prudently, and reforming internal party democracy are vital. The limitations of this study stem from its reliance on secondary literature and lack of primary field data. Nevertheless, the paper offers a coherent set of recommendations to revitalize Indian democracy in its second century.

KEYWORDS:

electoral reforms, India, election integrity, political funding, internal party democracy, synchronized elections.

1. Introduction

Democracy is built on the foundational principle that citizens participate in governance through free and fair elections. In India, the conduct of elections has been central to legitimizing authority, effectuating political change, and ensuring accountability. Since its first general election in 1951–52, India has sustained a remarkable trajectory of electoral exercise despite its diversity, size, and complexity (Equable, 2019). Yet, as India approaches its hundredth year of independence, the electoral system faces emergent stresses—ranging from the criminalization of politics and excessive money power to digital-age challenges like misinformation, opacity in funding, and difficulty in regulating internal party processes (Rastogi

et al., 2025; Singh, 2025).

The need to revamp the electoral apparatus becomes more compelling in a period when global democratic norms are under strain. The promise of a reformed, resilient democracy in India's second century must rest upon new structural safeguards, greater institutional credibility, and a citizen-centric orientation.

This paper frames the following guiding questions:

1. What are the major structural and operational challenges that weaken India's electoral system today?

2. How effective have past reforms been in addressing these challenges?

3. What feasible new reforms may strengthen electoral integrity, inclusivity, and accountability for the coming decades?

The subsequent sections present methodology, objectives, importance of the study, review of related literature, findings, limitations, and conclusion with recommendations.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying exclusively on secondary sources such as academic journals, government reports, commissions' reports, Supreme Court judgments, and policy papers. The steps followed are:

1. Literature search: identification and collection of scholarly articles, commission reports, and constitutional/legislative texts on electoral reforms in India.

2. Content analysis: systematic coding and thematic categorization of problems, reform proposals, and evaluative assessments within the literature.

3. Comparative synthesis: mapping past reforms against contemporary challenges to identify gaps and potential paths forward.

4. Framework construction: developing a reform roadmap based on grounded insights from literature and institutional analyses.

Because the study does not involve primary data (e.g. interviews, surveys), observational or field-based limitations exist. However, this design ensures depth of theoretical and policy insight across a broad

sweep of India's electoral history and proposals.

3. Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To identify and analyse the principal challenges undermining the transparency, fairness, and legitimacy of India's electoral process.

2. To critically evaluate the success, limitations, and gaps of past electoral reforms undertaken in India.

3. To propose new or enhanced reforms suitable for India's next era of democracy, aligned with constitutional principles and institutional realism.

4. To outline a practical roadmap for phased implementation of reforms in a politically and administratively feasible manner.

4. Importance of the Study

As India transitions into its second century of self-governance, this study holds importance on multiple fronts:

Normative significance: It strengthens democratic legitimacy by identifying reforms that enhance fairness, participation, and accountability.

Policy relevance: It provides a consolidated, up-to-date reference of reform proposals useful to policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society.

Academic contribution: By synthesizing various strands of electoral reform literature, this study helps identify gaps for future empirical research.

Public awareness: It helps citizens understand the systemic challenges underlying electoral malpractices and the urgency of reform.

5. Relevance to Contemporary India

This topic is especially relevant today because:

India faces complex socio-technological disruptions: misinformation, social media micro-targeting, and opaque funding are altering campaign dynamics.

The idea of One Nation, One Election (ONOE) has gained traction in political discourse as a potential efficiency reform. ([ACS Publisher] [1])

The Election Commission is under increasing stress to maintain autonomy, credibility, and responsiveness in a polarized environment.

As democratic models globally face erosion, India must refresh its electoral architecture to remain a credible exemplar.

6. Review of Related Literature

Electoral reform in India has been studied extensively from historical, institutional, technological, and normative perspectives. A few key strands are:

Historical and constitutional perspectives: Scholars trace the arc of India's electoral institutions from the founding Representation of People Acts, the establishment of the Election Commission under Article 324, and successive reforms over decades (JSTOR, 2005) ([JSTOR][2]).

Critical assessments of reform implementation: Multiple works point to the "reform-recommendation gap"—where commissions propose changes that fail in political implementation (Singh, 2025; "Electoral reforms in India: Challenges & Way Forward") ([Journal of Political Science][3]).

Technology and digitization: Recent studies explore how EVMs, Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), digital electoral roll purification, and election-process digitalization may enhance integrity or introduce new risks (IJFMR, 2024) ([IJFMR][4]).

Synchronized elections / ONOE: Analysts debate whether harmonizing election cycles would reduce cost, administrative burden, and voter fatigue, while also considering risks to federal balance (Arun Kumar, 2024) ([ACS Publisher][1]).

Institutional and financial reform: Literature examines problems of money politics, criminalization, internal democracy, and the role of political parties in shaping reforms (Rastogi et al., 2025; Meena & Jha, 2025) ([ResearchGate][5]).

Emerging frameworks in comparative and technical domains: The application of fairness measures in district-based multi-party elections (Mitra, 2022) ([arrive][6]) and the design of privacy-preserving auditable electoral rolls (Agrawal et al., 2024) ([arrive][7]) bring fresh methodological insights into reform debates.

These strands collectively suggest that India's next-generation

electoral reforms must integrate institutional, technological, and normative dimensions.

7. Findings & Discussion

From the literature and policy analysis, the following major themes emerge as both challenges and pathways for reform.

7.1 Key Challenges

1. Criminalization of Politics & Money Power

A significant proportion of legislator's face pending criminal cases, enabling coercion, patronage, and asymmetric competition (Singh, 2025). ([Journal of Political Science][3]) The capacity of wealthy candidates to outspend rivals distorts the electoral playing field.

2. Opacity and Unchecked Funding

The opaque system of political donations and use of instruments like electoral bonds lacks transparency, undermining accountability. Courts and reformers have repeatedly flagged this lacuna. ([IJCRT][8])

3. Weak Internal Party Democracy

Political parties routinely select candidates through opaque methods, with little internal accountability. This bottleneck undercuts democratic norms from the inside.

4. Institutional Autonomy and Credibility of the Election Commission

The Election Commission, though constitutionally independent, often wrestles with institutional under-resourcing, political pressures, and limited powers in enforcement. ([ResearchGate][5])

5. Fragmented Election Cycles

India's staggered elections (Parliament, state assemblies, local bodies) impose large administrative costs, policy disruption, and voter fatigue. The ONOE proposal gains traction partly in response. ([ACS Publisher][1])

6. Technological, Digital & Cyber Challenges

While EVMs have simplified vote recording, issues remain in verifying vote share integrity, ensuring auditability, and maintaining digital security. Fake news and micro-targeted misinformation campaigns further complicate the information environment. ([IJFMR][4])

7. Electoral Roll Integrity & Voter Authentication

Duplicate, obsolete, or erroneous entries in electoral rolls continue to compromise fairness. The National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP) attempted to link Aadhaar with EPIC to clean rolls, but legal and privacy concerns stalled full implementation. ([Wikipedia][9])

8. Booth-Wise Voting Disclosure (Totaliser debate)

Disclosure of booth-wise results can expose micro-level voting patterns and lead to targeted reprisals. The idea of a totaliser (aggregating vote counts across multiple booths) has been floated to prevent such micro-targeting, but faced political resistance. ([Wikipedia][10])

7.2 Evaluation of Past Reforms

Over decades, India has experimented with multiple reforms:

Introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and later VVPATs to strengthen vote recording and verification (trusted widely in Indian election discourse). ([Zendo][11])

Enactment and amendments to the Representation of the People Acts (1951, subsequent changes) regulating electoral procedures, disqualifications, and corrupt practices. ([Wikipedia][12])

Lowering voting age from 21 to 18 via the 61st Constitutional Amendment to broaden suffrage.

Judicial interventions and Supreme Court judgments to regulate model code of conduct, candidate disclosure norms, and independent oversight.

Periodic commission reports (e.g., Vohra Committee, Law Commission, Gupta Committee) advocating state funding, internal party reform, anti-defection strengthening, and electoral expenditure caps (equable, 2019). ([Journal of Political Science][13])

Despite these reforms, the implementation and enforcement gap is stark. Many recommended changes remain unadopted; enforcement is weak; and political consensus is often lacking. Observers characterize this gap as the central paradox of Indian electoral reforms. ([Journal of Political Science][3])

7.3 Proposed Reforms for the Next Century

Based on the gap analysis and literature synthesis, the following

reforms are proposed:

1.State Funding of Elections & Matching Grants

Introduce partial state funding of campaigns or matching public grants tied to verified small–donor contributions, to reduce dependence on large donors and level the playing field.

2. Stricter Transparency in Political Donations

Mandate real–time public disclosure of political contributions above thresholds; prohibit anonymous or bearer instruments; regulate electoral bonds with auditable backtracking.

3. Enforce Internal Party Democracy

Require political parties to adopt transparent, democratic internal processes for candidate selection, primary polls (wherever feasible), and leadership elections—with independent oversight by Election Commission or statutorily empowered bodies.

4. Synchronize Elections (ONOE) in Phases

Begin with synchronizing State Legislative Assemblies and Lok Sabha polls wherever terms align, to reduce costs, voter fatigue, and governance disruption. Gradually extend to local bodies. Constitutional amendments and careful federal design are needed to safeguard state autonomy. ([ACS Publisher][1])

5. Enhanced Autonomy & Powers for the Election Commission

Place the EC's funding under consolidated non–lapsable grants, protect Commissioners' security of tenure, and empower the EC with stronger penal and adjudicatory powers over electoral violations.

6. Totaliser Implementation for Booth Secrecy

Use totalisers to aggregate results across clusters of booths to mask micro–level results and avoid targeted reprisals. This must be paired with technological safeguards and transparency in aggregated reports. ([Wikipedia][10])

7. Privacy–Preserving Auditable Electoral Rolls

Deploy cryptographic protocols and audit mechanisms to maintain electoral rolls that are publicly auditable but shield sensitive personal data. The work by Agrawal et al. (2024) offers a promising technical model. ([arrive][7])

8. Multi–Preference Voting & Fairness Measures

Rather than simple plurality (First Past the Post), adopt limited preferential voting (e.g. ranking top 2–3 preferences) to reduce vote splitting and enhance representativeness. Mitra (2022) shows such multi–preference models improve fairness distributions. ([arrive][6])

9. Robust Digital & Cybersecurity Protocols

Mandate open–source, verifiable EVM software, regular audits, and end–to–end verifiability. Strengthen digital media regulations to curb misinformation during campaigns.

10. Voter Education & Citizen Engagement

Expand civic education campaigns, especially among marginalized and rural communities, to build informed participation. Enable participatory feedback on polling experiences.

11. Independent Election Court or Tribunal

Establish an independent electoral justice mechanism (separate from ordinary courts) with fast–track powers to adjudicate election petitions and enforce penalties.

Each of these reforms should be phased, piloted regionally, and continuously reviewed to ensure context compatibility and incremental acceptance.

8. Limitations of the Study

The study relies solely on secondary literature; there is no original empirical data via surveys or field visits.

The scope covers national–level reforms and does not deeply engage with state– or local–level electoral dynamics.

Implementation feasibility is considered in theory; political resistance, regional diversity, and institutional inertia may complicate real–world adoption.

The proposals, though grounded in literature, require further quantitative modelling or stakeholder consultation for validation.

9. Conclusion & Recommendations

As India stands on the threshold of its centennial as an independent democracy, the imperative is to reimagine and reinforce its electoral architecture. The challenges are manifold—money and criminalization, weak

institutional checks, technological risks, and fragmented electoral timing. Past reforms have been partial, uneven, or inadequately enforced.

Yet the second century offers an opportunity. By combining institutional safeguards, technological innovation, regulatory transparency, and enhanced citizen engagement, India can forge a transformed electoral ecology. Prioritized reforms such as state funding, internal party democracy, synchronized elections, totalisers, privacy–preserving rolls, and robust digital protocols present a balanced blueprint.

To convert these ideas into reality, the following roadmap is recommended:

1. Consensus building: Convene a bipartisan Electoral Reform Commission with representatives from political parties, ECI, judiciary, and civil society.

2. Pilot programs: Test reform components (e.g. totalisers, preferential ballots, digital roll audits) in selected states or districts.

3. Phased legislative changes: Introduce amendments to the Representation of the People Acts, and, where needed, constitutional amendments particularly for ONOE.

4. Capacity strengthening: Bolster the Election Commission in technical, legal, and financial dimensions.

5. Stakeholder capacity–building: Train election officials, political parties, and observers in the new systems.

6. Continuous evaluation: Establish independent monitoring, feedback loops, and mid–course corrections.

In sum, electoral reform is not a one–time exercise but a living process. Embracing a holistic, adaptive approach is the key to ensuring that India's democracy remains vibrant, credible, and inclusive into its next hundred years.

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Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.