



## Crisis of Credibility (Electoral Integrity and Democratic Values in India's Electoral System)

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### Abstract

There have been multiple reports of purported anomalies and heightened partisanship in Indian elections in recent years. Voter manipulation, erroneous and duplicate electoral records, and the Election Commission's purported prejudice are among the persistent issues that have cast doubt on the Commission's independence, impartiality, and democratic legitimacy. People's faith in democratic values is being undermined by this. Furthermore, there are still issues with the criminalization of politics and unrestrained party spending. The need for election reforms in India has once again become imperative due to these considerations.

**Keywords** : Voters, Democratic values, Credibility, Transparency, Election Commission of India.

### Introduction

The Election Commission of India, once considered the gold standard of election management bodies across the world, which has been known for conducting successful and fair elections in the world's largest democracy for more than seven decades, is today facing an unprecedented crisis of credibility that threatens the very fundamentals of the world's largest democracy. It is not that the Election Commission has not been questioned earlier, but it has increased a lot in the last decade. The constitutional body, established under Article 324 of the Indian Constitution and tasked with conducting free and fair elections, is grappling with mounting allegations of favouritism, procedural irregularities and systematic erosion of public trust.

Recent developments have brought the independence and impartiality of the Election Commission under intense scrutiny. Opposition allegations of electoral fraud and controversial decisions related to electoral roll revision and favouritism and transparency measures have created a storm of democratic dissent. The 2024 general election and subsequent state elections

have become the focal point of these concerns, with opposition leaders making unprecedented claims of institutional capture and systematic manipulation (BBC News, 2025).

Empirical evidence of a decline in public trust underscores the seriousness of these challenges. A comprehensive survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) - Lokniti has revealed that there has been a huge decline in people's faith in the Election Commission (Business Standard, 2024). This decline is not only statistical, but also a fundamental threat to democratic legitimacy, as electoral institutions derive their authority largely from public acceptance and trust. In this crisis over the existence of the Election Commission, there is a confluence of several factors: The continuing criminalisation of politics and their wildly increasing penetration, the controversial electoral bond scheme, which fuelled opaque political funding until it was judicially struck down; technical concerns related to electronic voting machine (EVM) security; and allegations of voter list manipulation. These issues have created a complex web of challenges that are undermining the Election Commission's core mandate of ensuring electoral integrity.

These developments have significance beyond India's borders, as the country's democratic trajectory influences global perceptions of electoral democracy in developing countries. The response of the Election Commission to these challenges and the effectiveness of the proposed and implemented reforms will determine whether India is able to restore faith in its democratic institutions or faces further democratic collapse.

### Structure of Research Methodology

<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To identify and analyse the major challenges affecting the credibility and transparency of the electoral process in India.</li> <li>To evaluate the impact and effectiveness of recent electoral reforms in removing irregularities and prejudices, in order to enhance public confidence and democratic participation.</li> </ul>
<b>Research-Question</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the major sources of irregularities and biases undermining the integrity of elections in India, and what has changed in recent years?</li> <li>How effective have recent electoral reforms been in improving transparency, reducing malpractices and restoring voters' confidence in India's electoral process?</li> </ul>
<b>Research-Method</b>	Qualitative research method has been adopted for research study.
<b>Data</b>	Data is based on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, government documents, reports of the Election Commission of India, judicial pronouncements, legislative debates and other sources.

### An analysis of the declining credibility of the Election Commission

The declining credibility of the Election Commission can be understood in the following key aspects:

- **Contemporary electoral controversies and allegations** - The period from 2024 to 2026 has been marked by unprecedented public confrontations between the opposition and the Election Commission. The controversy began in August 2024 when Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, made detailed allegations of electoral fraud and accused the Election Commission of systematic "vote theft" in collusion with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Gandhi's specific allegations included the claim that more than 1,00,000 bogus voters were added to the electoral rolls in Karnataka's Mahadevapura constituency, including duplicate registrations, fake addresses and a large number of registrations at one place. He further alleged that crucial CCTV footage from polling stations was systematically removed after 45 days, limiting the time of post-poll checking (Gandhi, 2025).

The recent actions of the Election Commission of India (ECI) in the context of Special Intensive Review (SIR) have raised questions on its impartiality and democratic values. Steps such as massive deletion of names in electoral rolls under Special Intensive Revision (SIR), slow processing of pending appeals, delay in PILs, sudden transfers of officials, and stringent restrictions on electoral activities have become impediments to citizen participation. The Commission's decision to delete 65 lakh names from the electoral rolls of the state of Bihar led to widespread allegations of systematic disenfranchisement targeting marginalised communities. The Supreme Court's intervention in the Bihar case exposed procedural deficiencies within the Election Commission, with the court describing the commission's actions as a demonstration of "procedural failures" and ordering the availability of searchable electoral rolls. This judicial rebuke underlined the growing perception that the Election Commission's transparency measures were inadequate to contemporary democratic standards (BBC News, 2025).

Massive deletion of voters list under SIR in West Bengal. In February 2026, 58 lakh names were deleted and about 60 lakh names were kept under adjudication (Hindustan Times, 2026). The updates that were received on the ECI website were complex, no aggregated data was published. Despite contacting the returning officer on government orders, the general voter was not informed in time. Many of the appellants were forced to go to court before the election, yet were deprived of voting.

Moreover, the Election Commission's refusal to ask for video footage of polling stations on the ground that it would violate women's privacy shows its disregard for democratic values and abuse of power.

- **Electoral Bond Scheme and Financial Irregularities** - The electoral bond scheme, which began in 2017 and remained in force until it was quashed by the Supreme Court in February 2024, is one of the biggest threats to electoral integrity in recent Indian history. The scheme, designed to bring transparency to political funding, created, according to critics, a "legitimate corruption" mechanism that fuelled unprecedented levels of opaque

political donations. The scheme's operation reveals a systematic bias towards the ruling party, with the BJP receiving about 60% of the total .98 bn raised through electoral bonds. The opposition Indian National Congress received less than 10% of the donations, creating a huge disparity in the electoral fray. Even more worrying was the revelation of possible transactional arrangements, in which companies under government scrutiny for various violations were making huge donations to the ruling parties (Mudgal, 2024). The analysis showed that 33 loss-making companies donated ₹450 crore to the BJP despite a collective loss of ₹1 lakh crore in seven years. Additionally, 17 companies, which either paid zero tax or received tax exemptions, donated ₹600 crore to the ruling party. These patterns indicate systematic regulatory capture and the use of political donations to influence government decision-making processes. (The Times of India, 2024). The Supreme Court's holding that the scheme violates citizens' right to information under Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution highlights its fundamental incompatibility with the principles of democratic transparency. However, the ruling party's announcement that it would attempt to reintroduce a similar system indicates continued resistance to meaningful electoral finance reform (Mudgal, 2024).

- **Concerns regarding Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) security and transparency** - Electronic voting machines were created for the purpose of increasing electoral integrity, but they have become a source of major controversy and distrust. Technical experts and opposition parties have consistently raised concerns about EVM security, and some researchers have hinted at possible vulnerabilities in the system. Independent studies have shown that attackers with brief physical access to EVMs can tamper with votes through hardware manipulation or memory alteration (The Probe, 2024). The security measures implemented by the Election Commission, including anti-tampering seals, have been criticised for their inadequacy. These seals, which are mainly made of stickers, threads and wax, have proven to be easily tamperable without being detected. Additionally, the Supreme Court's rejection of petitions seeking 100% VVPAT verification in April 2024 has further raised concerns about transparency. Concerns have also been raised about the limited verification process, with only five EVMs in each assembly segment subject to VVPAT (Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail) verification (ADR, 2024). The Court's argument that increased verification would delay results and require additional manpower was seen by critics as prioritizing administrative convenience over electoral integrity. The dismissal of these petitions and the allegations of discrepancies in the counting of votes in various constituencies have reinforced the perception that technological solutions lack adequate safeguards.
- **Disinformation and digital manipulation** - The increasing trend of digital campaigning and social media manipulation has posed new challenges to electoral purity. Political parties have become increasingly dependent on WhatsApp groups and closed messaging

platforms to disseminate targeted political content, including disinformation and communally divisive rhetoric. The 2019 general elections saw the systematic use of personal data, including Aadhaar numbers and voter information, to create targeted electoral rolls for micro-targeting through social media platforms (Joshi, 2024). Research by organisations such as Global Witness and Access Now has shown that major social media platforms, including YouTube, approved ads containing election propaganda in multiple Indian languages. These platforms approved content that included information on voter suppression, false instructions for voting procedures, and incitement to prevent certain groups from voting. The spread of deepfake technology has created additional complications, and there are reports of political parties allegedly circulating doctored videos during elections. Symptoms, 2024). Accessible infrastructure and huge user base for political entities ensures faster dissemination of doctored content aimed at misleading voters and influencing electoral outcomes. Independent fact-checking organisations are finding it difficult to keep pace with the volume and complexity of election propaganda.

- **The erosion of public trust and institutional credibility** - The most worrying finding of recent research is the systematic decline in public trust in the Election Commission of India. Data from the CSDS-Lokniti survey shows a worrying trend in many states, where trust levels are witnessing an unprecedented decline. In India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, the percentage of citizens expressing "no-confidence" in the Election Commission increased from 11% in 2019 to 31% in 2024, a nearly three-fold increase. This erosion of trust is not limited to opposition strongholds but is spread across different political constituencies. In Delhi, this decline reached from 11% to 30%, while Madhya Pradesh saw an increase from 6% to 22%. Professor Sanjay Kumar, Co-Director, Lokniti-CSDS, described this trend as a "considerable" falling trust, which is a "major concern for the Election Commission" (Kumar, 2025). The survey also revealed that 45% of the voters believe that the possibility of EVM manipulation by the ruling party is "somewhat" or "quite" high, reflecting deep doubts over electoral integrity. Business Standard, 2024). Their significance lies not only in their magnitude, but also in their systematic nature across different states and demographic groups, indicating that the crisis of confidence goes beyond regional or party divisions.

### **Recent Reform Initiatives and Their Limitations**

The Election Commission has initiated several reform initiatives to deal with the growing criticisms. In 2024, ECI launched 28 major initiatives aimed at strengthening transparency, efficiency and inclusiveness. These reforms included launching a digital platform called ECINET integrating over 40 applications and portals, implementing 100% webcasting at polling stations and improving VVPAT verification protocol (DD News, 2025). However, these initiatives have been inadequate in addressing the underlying structural challenges. The system of appointment of Election Commissioners still remains problematic. The Supreme Court had directed the

constitution of a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition and the Chief Justice of India to ensure independence in appointments. However, the 2023 Act replaced the Chief Justice with a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister, effectively giving the executive a two-thirds majority in the selection process. The change has been sharply criticised by constitutional experts, who argue that it undermines the court's intent to keep the commission free from the influence of the executive. This system contradicts the recommendation made by the Supreme Court in March 2023 to include the Chief Justice of India in the selection process to ensure fairness (Supreme Court Observer, 2025).

The Election Commission's decision to destroy CCTV footage after 45 days, implemented through an administrative directive of 2024, has been particularly controversial. This policy shift from default-open to default-closed system with respect to electoral records has been challenged as imposing "unreasonable restrictions on the fundamental right to information of voters" (Bhardwaj, 2025). The timing of this change, occurring immediately after judicial orders for transparency, suggests a reactive rather than proactive approach to governance.

### **Democratic Implications and Systemic Risks**

The findings of this research suggest that India's electoral system is facing a multifaceted crisis that threatens the fundamental integrity of democratic governance. The systematic decline in public confidence in the Election Commission is more than a temporary setback; This signals a possible erosion of democratic legitimacy that could have far-reaching consequences on India's political stability and international reputation. Conducting the process of SIR just a few months before the elections was not the right decision for democracy as a whole. In the context of Bihar and West Bengal, the names of a large population that were removed under SIR were not all valid. In this situation, those voters whose names were not found enough to prove their citizenship.

In West Bengal, some senior officials and voters challenged the SIR. The Supreme Court heard the objections related to SIR, and sought a detailed affidavit to rid the ECI of red tape. The Supreme Court decided that the results of the appeals approved by the tribunal should be included in the electoral rolls before the assembly elections, otherwise it would be unfair to take away the right to vote. The court clarified that the pendency of the appellate process does not mean the validity of the vote. If we look at the case of Bihar sir, many appeals were made against the Election Commission, yet a large population was deprived of the right to vote due to delay in actions and lack of time.

Today, the work done in the context of SIR raises a question mark on the functioning of the ECI, its obligation to the Constitution and as an instrument of upholding democratic values. Moreover, the coming together of multiple challenges such as criminalisation of politics, opaque electoral financing, technological vulnerabilities and institutional capture creates a storm that undermines the foundational principle of free and fair elections. The CSDS-Lokniti survey data somewhere reflects the context that in five years, trust in the Election Commission has declined

from 51% to 28%, reflecting a rate of decline that, if continued, could render the institution ineffective in maintaining democratic legitimacy.

This has implications far beyond India's borders, as the country serves as an important case study for electoral democracy in developing countries. A democratic collapse in the world's largest democracy could provide precedent and justification for authoritarian tendencies in other countries, damaging global democratic norms and institutions.

### **Suggestions**

For re-establishing the Election Commission as a neutral, transparent and independent institution to maintain its credibility are as follows:

- **Urgent need for structural reforms** - Based on the research findings, several important reforms are necessary to restore electoral integrity and public confidence. The functioning of the Election Commission should be autonomous and democratic, the discharge of responsibilities should be in accordance with democratic legitimacy. The election process should be without any discrimination and the right to vote of the citizens should not be violated. The system of appointment of Election Commissioners should be restructured to ensure genuine independence from the control of the executive. The inclusion of the Chief Justice of India in the selection committee, as originally recommended by the Supreme Court, is necessary to restore institutional credibility. At the same time, comprehensive campaign finance reform is imperative to address the systemic bias generated by opaque financing mechanisms. The establishment of a national election fund with mandatory public funding for political parties, strict limits on private donations and full transparency in political funding, is essential to level the electoral playing field. Moreover, criminalisation of politics requires urgent legislative intervention. Establishing dedicated fast-track courts to dispose of criminal cases involving electoral candidates within one year, as well as automatic disqualification in serious criminal charges, is essential to restore public confidence in the electoral process.
- **Improving technology and transparency** - EVM security concerns require extensive technological upgradation and advanced validation processes. Despite the Supreme Court's disapproval, the implementation of 100% VVPAT verification remains crucial to maintain the confidence of voters. Additionally, priority should be given to the development of open-source, auditable voting systems that allow independent verification while maintaining voter confidentiality. The Election Commission's recent decision to limit access to election records and destroy CCTV footage shows a dangerous regression towards obscurity. This policy will have to be reversed, with the establishment of comprehensive digital archival systems that maintain electoral records over long periods of time while providing transparent access protocols for researchers, political parties and civil society organisations. To tackle digital disinformation, the Election Commission will have to provide better regulatory powers over social media platforms and digital campaigning. This

includes mandatory disclosure of political advertising funds, fact-checking systems of election content, and penalties for platforms that fail to prevent the spread of election disinformation.

- **Strengthening democratic safeguards** - Research shows that existing safeguards have proved inadequate in addressing contemporary challenges to electoral integrity. Constitutional amendments may be necessary to provide more robust safeguards for the independence of the Election Commission, including fixed tenures for commissioners, clear qualifications for appointment, and restrictions on government positions after retirement. The role of civil society and media monitoring should be strengthened through legal safeguards and improved access to information. Systematic destruction of electoral records and limits to transparency violate the basic principle that informed participation of citizens is essential in a democracy. Regular assessment of public confidence in electoral institutions should be institutionalised through independent surveys and research, including transparent reporting of findings and responsive policy adjustments. The CSDS-Lokniti survey model provides a valuable framework for continuous monitoring of institutional credibility..

#### **Limitations**

- **Methodological constraints** - This research is primarily based on secondary data sources, including academic studies, government documents, judicial pronouncements, and media reports. Although this approach provides comprehensive coverage of the topic, it also includes limitations to original sources, including potential bias in reporting and analysis. The rapidly changing nature of electoral disputes means that some findings can quickly become outdated, requiring constant updating of the analysis.
- **Limits on time and space** - This research focuses mainly on post-2019 developments, which may not incorporate long-term historical trends or cyclical patterns in electoral politics. The emphasis on recent controversies, while relevant to understanding current challenges, may not adequately define these issues in the context of India's broader democratic development. Moreover, the scope of the analysis, while broad, may not fully address the complex interrelationship between electoral integrity and the broader socio-economic and political factors that influence democratic governance.

#### **Conclusion**

In India, which is recognized as the largest democratic system in the modern world, the Election Commission is considered to be the most important, reliable and carrier of democracy. It was once considered the gold standard of election management bodies across the world. But its declining credibility is not only damaging the institution, but also the values of the world's largest democracy. The Election Commission needs to be re-established as a neutral, transparent, independent institution and a rational decision-maker to maintain its credibility, only then can India's democratic values be upheld.

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