INDIA'S EXPANDING ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE WITH REFERENCE TO DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS, ELECTORAL MALPRACTICES, AND REFORMS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY – A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

India's electoral system is expanding rapidly, with more voters, especially women and youth, participating in 2024. This growth influences both democracy and the economy, as voters demand policies on jobs, education, and social welfare. However, the electoral process faces challenges like corruption, vote manipulation, and opaque political funding, such as electoral bonds. Historical scams, like the 2G spectrum and Coalgate, show how electoral malpractices harm economic stability and public trust. Recent allegations of digital interference and fake votes highlight the need for reforms to ensure transparency and fairness. Electoral bonds, intended to make donations transparent, have been criticized for enabling secret funding and favoritism. To strengthen India's democracy and economy, reforms must focus on reducing corruption, improving electoral transparency, and safeguarding digital security. This study reviews past and present electoral issues, highlighting their economic impact and suggesting measures to improve electoral integrity for a sustainable democracy. The research examines urgent and rapidly evolving challenges that are becoming increasingly significant in today's interconnected world, emphasizing their importance in the modern global context.

Keywords: Vote Manipulation, Electoral Reforms, Corruption, Electoral Bonds, Democracy, Economic Impact, Economic Stability, Digital Security and Social Welfare.

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The theme of the article

The expanding electoral landscape of India in 2024 reflects profound demographic shifts, increased political engagement among youth and women, and significant economic implications. With over 98.99 crore registered voters—an increase of 9.42 crore from 2019—the electorate demonstrates India's growing democratic vibrancy. Notably, women's participation has surged, with 13 crore more women voters compared to 2014, signaling advancements in gender empowerment and influencing welfare policies. Youth voters, particularly in the 18–29 age group, now constitute a vital demographic, demanding policies on employment, digital inclusion, and entrepreneurship, thus shaping economic priorities.

The electoral process is also intertwined with systemic challenges such as malpractices, scams, and opaque political funding mechanisms like electoral bonds, which threaten transparency and democratic integrity. Historical controversies, from Dr. Ambedkar's 1952 election to recent digital manipulation allegations, underscore the evolving nature of electoral malpractices and their economic repercussions, including misallocation of resources and erosion of investor confidence. This article critically analyzes India's electoral evolution, highlighting demographic dynamics, electoral malpractices, and their economic impacts, emphasizing the urgent need for reforms to uphold electoral integrity, transparency, and systemic safeguards. By examining secondary data sources, statistical trends, and historical patterns, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how electoral processes influence India's democratic resilience and economic development, advocating for strengthened institutions and transparent governance in the face of ongoing challenges.

Statement of the problem

The integrity of India's electoral process faces significant challenges due to persistent malpractices, systemic corruption, and opaque political funding mechanisms. Despite constitutional safeguards and electoral reforms, issues such as vote manipulation, booth capturing, vote rejection, and digital interference continue to undermine the credibility of democratic elections. The introduction of controversial schemes like electoral bonds has further exacerbated concerns over transparency, enabling large-scale anonymous donations that distort political influence and accountability. Historical and contemporary electoral scams, including the 2G spectrum and Coalgate scandals, highlight how electoral malpractices impact not only democratic legitimacy but also economic stability by misallocating resources and eroding investor confidence.

Moreover, discrepancies in voter data, allegations of fake votes, and digital manipulation threaten fair representation and public trust. This complex landscape raises critical questions about the effectiveness of existing electoral safeguards, transparency in political financing, and the ability of institutions to prevent malpractices. Addressing these challenges is vital for strengthening India's democratic fabric and ensuring that electoral outcomes genuinely reflect the will of the people, thereby safeguarding economic development and social justice. The overarching problem lies in balancing technological advancements and legal reforms with effective enforcement to curb electoral malpractices and foster a transparent, accountable, and resilient electoral system. The study examines urgent and fast-changing challenges that are gaining importance in today's interconnected world, emphasizing their relevance in the present global landscape.

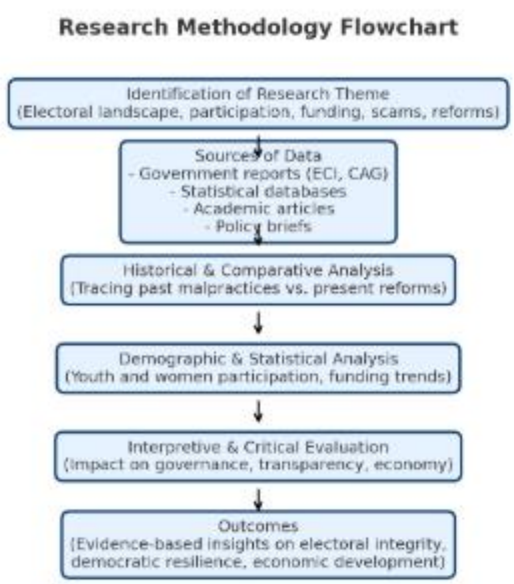
Objective of the article

The overall objective of the article is to analyze India's expanding electoral landscape in 2024, highlighting demographic shifts, youth and women's political participation, and their economic implications. It examines historical and contemporary electoral malpractices, electoral scams, and reforms, emphasizing their impact on governance and economic integrity. The article also critically evaluates the influence of political funding mechanisms like electoral bonds, discussing transparency issues and associated scams. Ultimately, it aims to underscore the importance of electoral integrity, transparency, and systemic reforms for sustainable economic development and democratic resilience in India with the help of secondary sources of information and statistical data pertaining to the theme of the article.

Research Methodology of the article

This article is based on a qualitative and analytical research approach, drawing primarily on secondary sources of information. The methodology involves a comprehensive review of published reports, government documents, Election Commission of India (ECI) data, Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports, policy briefs, and research articles from reputed journals and think tanks. Statistical data from official sources, including voter turnout records, demographic profiles, and funding disclosures, are used to understand electoral trends, participation rates, and the economic implications of political processes. A historical analysis is applied to trace patterns of electoral malpractices and scams, from earlier controversies like the coal allocation and 2G spectrum cases to contemporary debates surrounding electoral bonds. This helps situate current issues within a broader governance and institutional framework.

The methodology also incorporates a comparative perspective, examining the differences between past and present mechanisms of political funding, transparency, and electoral reforms. To highlight demographic dynamics, the study uses available data on youth and women's participation, linking it to economic and social implications. The interpretive analysis method is employed to critically evaluate the impact of electoral reforms, funding practices, and integrity challenges on India's democratic resilience and economic development. Overall, the methodology combines descriptive statistics, document analysis, and critical evaluation of secondary literature. This approach enables a balanced and evidence-based understanding of how electoral integrity, transparency, and reforms shape governance outcomes and contribute to sustainable economic growth in India. The collected data and information will be carefully analyzed and interpreted to generate meaningful insights, contributing to the formulation of informed and evidence-based policies.



The research methodology is depicted in the flowchart, showing the sequential process of identifying the theme, collecting secondary data, analyzing historical and demographic aspects, and moving toward evaluation and outcomes.

India's Expanding Electorate in 2024: Demographic Shifts, Youth Influence, and Economic Implications

India's voter base has expanded significantly in 2024, reflecting both demographic growth and rising political participation. The total number of registered voters stands at 98.99 crore, up from 90.42 crore in 2019, marking an increase of 9.42 crore new voters. This steady rise is evident over two decades, with the electorate growing from 67 crore in 2004 to 97 crore in 2024. Among these, 51.16% are male and 48.84% are female, with women's participation showing remarkable progress, reports indicate that by 2024, there are 13 crore more women voters compared to 2014. This sharp rise reflects not only demographic trends but also the success of awareness campaigns encouraging women's political engagement, which can influence the design of welfare policies, healthcare programs, and education reforms aimed at gender empowerment.

Youth participation is another defining feature of the 2024 elections. Approximately 2.30 crore voters fall within the 18–29 age group, and in Tamil Nadu alone, 57 lakh are first-time voters out of a total 6.46 crore voters. Nationally, this demographic shift has significant economic implications, as younger voters are more likely to demand policies focused on employment opportunities, skill development, digital inclusion, and entrepreneurship. Their influence can steer governments toward investing in job-creating sectors, technology-driven industries, and higher education reforms, aligning political promises with the aspirations of a young and ambitious electorate. The youth's growing participation also signals a demand for greater accountability and transparency in governance, which can reshape India's economic priorities in the long run.

The Election Commission has expanded its infrastructure and awareness drives to accommodate this surge in voters. Over 65 lakh Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) will be deployed nationwide, ensuring accessibility and efficiency. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu have witnessed the most significant increases in voter numbers, underscoring their pivotal role in shaping both political outcomes and economic policies. With 17.7 crore Indians now above the age of 60, there is also a growing demand for pension reforms, healthcare schemes, and social security measures. Thus, the 2024 elections highlight not just the expansion of democratic participation but also its strong economic undercurrents, ranging from youth-driven employment agendas to women-centric welfare measures and elderly-focused social protection programs. The details of the Voter

Distribution by State and Union Territory in India's 2024 General Elections are stated in table – 1.

Table - 1

Voter Distribution by State and Union Territory in India's 2024 General Elections

S.No.	State / UT	Male Voters	Female Voters	Third Gender	Total Voters
1.	Andhra Pradesh	2,03,23,370	2,11,25,319	3,401	4,14,52,090
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	4,37,846	4,54,014	2	8,91,862
3.	Assam	1,25,20,759	1,25,72,797	-	2,50,93,952
4.	Bihar	3,82,58,141	3,41,54,746	396	7,24,14,697
5.	Goa	5,73,648	6,10,728	15	11,84,289
6.	Gujarat	2,59,96,226	2,47,65,353	1,655	5,07,63,234
7.	Haryana	1,09,40,262	97,78,651	469	2,07,19,382
8.	Himachal Pradesh	28,66,287	28,14,770	37	56,81,094
9.	Jharkhand	2,76,49,192	2,78,03,826	1,141	5,54,54,159
10.	Karnataka	1,34,30,674	1,43,83,504	361	2,78,14,539
11.	Madhya Pradesh	2,93,68,683	2,79,71,039	2,463	5,73,41,132
12.	Maharashtra	5,07,67,256	4,79,50,568	3,362	9,87,24,186
13.	Manipur	9,99,871	10,70,404	284	20,70,559
14.	Meghalaya	11,36,330	11,68,114	-	23,04,450
15.	Mizoram	4,22,134	4,50,183	-	8,72,317
16.	Nagaland	6,69,163	6,76,450	-	13,45,613
17.	Odisha	1,72,86,535	1,69,76,266	3,484	3,42,65,838
18.	Punjab	1,12,77,220	1,02,04,985	-754	2,14,82,595
19.	Rajasthan	2,83,63,459	2,64,61,708	681	5,48,25,848
20.	Sikkim	2,35,945	2,35,568	4	4,71,517
21.	Tamil Nadu	3,13,09,963	3,26,20,825	9,421	6,39,40,209
22.	Tripura	14,52,767	14,43,339	5,997	15,42,198
23.	Uttar Pradesh	8,21,60,877	7,20,71,320	5,997	15,42,38,194
24.	Uttarakhand	88,66,877	87,96,079	1,774	1,76,54,730
25.	West Bengal	3,88,66,877	3,76,96,079	1,774	7,65,64,730
26.	Chandigarh	10,47,917	10,31,796	487	21,61,327
27.	Delhi	1,32,83,044	1,32,51,796	72	2,65,21,912
28.	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	44,09,700	1,69,97,128	2,878	3,37,43,978
29.	Daman & Diu	1,67,43,972	1,60,487	4	3,14,910
30.	Andaman & Nicobar	1,61,451	1,52,970	-	3,14,421
31.	Lakshadweep	33,708	26,050	1	4,26,623
32.	Puducherry	2,20,672	73,47,664	1,267	75,67,606
33.	Ladakh	84,303	21,284	-	1,05,587
34.	Others	29,276	54,686	-161	10,18,361

Source: Election Commission of India (ECI) – Statistical Reports of General Election to Lok Sabha 2024 Available via: https://eci.gov.in and on the Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India**:** https://data.gov.in/catalog/general-election-lok-sabha-2024-statistical-reports-data.

The voter distribution across India's states and union territories highlights the demographic weight and potential economic influence of each region. States like Uttar Pradesh

(15.42 crore voters), Maharashtra (9.87 crore), Bihar (7.24 crore), and West Bengal (7.65 crore) represent not only the largest voter bases but also the largest consumer markets and labor pools in the country. Their high population density means that electoral promises often revolve around infrastructure, job creation, and poverty alleviation—policies that directly influence economic growth. Conversely, smaller states and UTs such as Lakshadweep (42,623 voters) and Sikkim (4.7 lakh voters) hold little sway numerically but receive disproportionate economic attention due to their strategic and geographic significance, often relying heavily on central financial transfers for sustenance.

A notable economic inference is the gender distribution in the voter base, where many states such as Tamil Nadu (3.26 crore female voters vs 3.13 crore males) and Arunachal Pradesh (4.54 lakh females vs 4.37 lakh males) show a higher female electorate. This feminization of the voter base has direct economic implications: policies around healthcare, maternal welfare, education, and women's employment are likely to gain prominence. States where women voters outnumber men often see stronger demands for social welfare schemes such as subsidized food, housing, and direct cash transfers, which in turn can reshape state budgets and fiscal planning. On the other hand, states with a male-dominated electorate may emphasize industrial growth, youth employment, and agricultural subsidies.

Critical anomalies in the dataset, like Punjab showing "-754" third gender voters, or disproportionate figures in UTs such as Dadra & Nagar Haveli (3.37 crore voters, an unlikely number given population size), point toward possible data inconsistencies or recording errors. Such discrepancies highlight challenges in maintaining accurate electoral rolls, which also carry economic risks, such as misallocation of government spending, leakages in welfare schemes, and inefficient resource planning. In a broader sense, voter distribution data not only maps democratic participation but also serves as a foundation for economic policymaking, investment planning, and welfare distribution, making its accuracy and interpretation critical for India's long-term development trajectory. The details of State-wise Voter Distribution and Economic Implications (2024) are stated in table – 2.

Table - 2

State-wise Voter Distribution and Economic Implications (2024)

S.No.	**State / UT**	**Total Voters (Approx.)**	**Key Economic Implications**
1.	**Uttar Pradesh**	15.42 crore	Largest voter base → strong push for **agriculture subsidies, rural employment**

			(MGNREGA), infrastructure (roads, housing), and social welfare schemes.
2.	**Maharashtra**	9.87 crore	Economic hub → focus on **industrial growth, urban employment, MSMEs, farmer distress relief** due to agrarian crisis in Vidarbha.
3.	**Bihar**	7.24 crore	Heavy reliance on migration/remittances → policies on **rural jobs, education, healthcare, poverty alleviation** dominate.
4.	**West Bengal**	7.65 crore	High rural and female voter base → demand for **welfare subsidies, women's empowerment, small-scale industries, agriculture support**.
5.	**Tamil Nadu**	6.39 crore	Female voters outnumber males → stronger push for **welfare schemes, healthcare, education, digital inclusion**; industrial hubs also influence **manufacturing policies**.
6.	**Madhya Pradesh**	5.73 crore	Agriculture-driven → focus on **farm loan waivers, irrigation, rural electrification**.
7.	**Rajasthan**	5.48 crore	Drought-prone → policies for **water management, renewable energy (solar), desert agriculture**.
8.	**Gujarat**	5.07 crore	Industrial state → strong push for **manufacturing incentives, trade, investment, and industrial corridor development**.
9.	**Odisha**	3.42 crore	Mineral-rich, disaster-prone → demand for **mining regulations, disaster relief, coastal economy support**.
10.	**Karnataka**	2.78 crore	IT & tech hub → focus on **digital economy, urban development, start-ups, agriculture (Cauvery basin)**.
11.	**Punjab**	2.14 crore	Agrarian economy → **MSP, farm loan waivers, agro-processing industries** dominate policy debates.
12.	**Haryana**	2.07 crore	Industrial + agrarian mix → focus on **MSMEs, automobile industry, agriculture subsidies**.
13.	**Delhi**	2.65 crore	Urban-centric → policies around **housing, pollution control, infrastructure, urban employment**.
14.	**Jharkhand**	5.54 crore	Mining-based → policies on **tribal welfare, mining royalties, forest rights, jobs**.
15.	**Smaller States & UTs (Goa, Sikkim, Mizoram, Nagaland, Andaman, etc.)**	< 50 lakh	Depend on **central funding, tourism, agriculture, and special subsidies**; limited electoral weight but high **strategic/geographic importance**.

Source: **Election Commission of India (ECI) – General Election to Lok Sabha 2024 Statistical Reports** https://data.gov.in/catalog/general-election-lok-sabha-2024-statistical-reports-data.

The state-wise voter distribution for 2024 reveals a strong correlation between electoral demographics and the shaping of economic priorities. States with larger voter bases, such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, and West Bengal**,** command significant policy attention due to their decisive influence in elections. Here, the economic implications lean heavily toward agriculture subsidies, rural employment, welfare measures, and poverty alleviation**,** reflecting the predominantly agrarian and low-income voter profiles. These states are also hotspots for migration, remittances, and rural distress, pushing governments to expand social safety nets, infrastructure development, and direct benefit transfers**.** The emphasis on welfare in these regions highlights how voter size often translates into expansive economic commitments by governments.

Industrialized states like Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Haryana showcase a different trajectory. Their voter bases, though smaller compared to agrarian states, drive national growth through manufacturing, technology, and services. Consequently, economic policies here tilt toward industrial incentives, digital innovation, urban infrastructure, start-up ecosystems, and global trade integration**.** Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, with significant female and urban voter influence, also demand progressive policies in education, healthcare, and digital inclusion**,** showing how socio-demographic profiles intertwine with economic demands. This indicates that while agrarian-heavy states push governments toward populist, welfare-heavy spending, industrial hubs steer long-term strategies for competitiveness and innovation.

Resource-rich but smaller states like Odisha and Jharkhand highlight the dilemma of growth versus sustainability**.** Their economies rely on mining and resource extraction, but they face recurring challenges of tribal welfare, environmental degradation, and disaster vulnerability**.** Similarly, drought-prone Rajasthan demands water security and renewable energy investments, while Punjab’s farmer-driven politics reinforces the persistence of MSP and subsidy debates**.** Smaller states and UTs, though electorally limited, hold strategic importance in tourism, border security, and ecological balance, making them dependent on central funding and special subsidies**.** The critical inference is that India’s electoral map mirrors an economic fault line between welfare-driven rural states and growth-driven industrial states**,** forcing governments to balance populist pressures with long-term structural reforms.

India’s First Election Scam: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s Controversial Defeat in 1952

In India’s first general elections of 1952, a major controversy unfolded in the Mumbai North Lok Sabha constituency, where Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian

Constitution, contested. The election witnessed the rejection of an astonishing 74,333 votes, while the margin of defeat stood at just 14,561 votes. This irregularity cost Ambedkar the election, marking a serious setback for the very leader who had shaped the foundations of India's democratic system. Instead of quietly conceding, Ambedkar challenged the results by filing an 18-page petition before the Central Election Commission on 21 April 1952, making it the first-ever election petition in independent India. This incident came to be seen not merely as a personal loss for Ambedkar, but as a blemish on the integrity of the nation's nascent democratic process.

From an economic perspective, such electoral irregularities highlight the deep interlinkages between politics and resource distribution. Elections determine who controls policymaking, and in turn, who directs subsidies, development funds, and economic reforms. The rejection of tens of thousands of votes in a close contest undermined public trust, signaling that political power, and consequently economic decision-making, could be swayed by procedural lapses or manipulation. For a developing nation like India in the 1950s, where the allocation of scarce resources, land reforms, and industrial policies were crucial for growth, electoral credibility was essential. Ambedkar's loss due to contested practices not only weakened democratic legitimacy but also indirectly influenced the trajectory of economic justice, especially for marginalized groups whom Ambedkar represented. The details of Parliamentary Election Scams in India (1952–2024) are presented in table – 3.

Table - 3

Parliamentary Election Scams in India (1952–2024)

Year	Election/Incident	Nature of Scam / Irregularity	Key Details / Outcome
1952	Mumbai North Lok Sabha	Rejected votes	74,333 votes rejected; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar lost by 14,561 votes; filed an 18-page petition challenging results.
1957	Matihani, Bihar	Booth capturing	Term "booth capturing" coined; party loyalists forcibly voted on behalf of legitimate voters.
1971	Indira Gandhi, Rae Bareli	Electoral malpractices	Use of government machinery, bribery, and coercion; victory later nullified by Allahabad High Court (1975).

1975	National Elections	Emergency abuses	Suppression of opposition, media, and political dissent; indirect election manipulation.
1987	Jammu & Kashmir Assembly	Voter intimidation	Allegations of rigging, forced ballot stamping, and polling station takeovers; contributed to insurgency.
1991	General Elections	Candidate misconduct	Localized booth capturing and vote rigging in several constituencies; highlighted weaknesses in election monitoring.
2008	Cash-for-Votes Scandal	Parliamentary bribery	MPs allegedly bribed to abstain from confidence vote; exposed via sting operation; political fallout.
2010	2G Spectrum Scam	Misuse of political office	Allocation of 2G licenses at below-market prices; loss of ₹1.76 lakh crore; high-level politicians and officials implicated.
2012	Coal Allocation Scam (Coalgate)	Favoritism in resource allocation	Coal blocks given without bidding; estimated loss ₹1.86 lakh crore; several political leaders investigated.
2014	Electoral Bond Scheme	Lack of transparency in funding	Anonymous political donations enabled large, untraceable campaign funding; criticized for reducing accountability.
2024	Maharashtra Elections	Digital & media manipulation	Allegations of SMS and media suppression; Congress claimed outreach blocked; Election Commission demanded proof.
2024	General Elections	Alleged vote rigging	Rahul Gandhi and opposition leaders claimed manipulation; ECI stated “one person, one vote” safeguards exist.

Source: Compiled from historical records and credible news reports on India’s parliamentary elections and documented electoral malpractices (1952–2024).

The historical trajectory of electoral malpractices in India reveals a persistent challenge to democratic processes, beginning with the 1952 Mumbai North Lok Sabha election where 74,333 votes were rejected, causing Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to lose by 14,561 votes. Early incidents, such as booth capturing in Matihani, Bihar (1957), illustrate localized yet highly disruptive practices that undermined voter representation. Over time, the nature of electoral fraud evolved from direct interference like voter intimidation and booth capturing to systemic manipulations, including misuse of government machinery (Indira Gandhi, 1971) and suppression of political dissent during the Emergency (1975). Statistical patterns indicate that electoral irregularities were often concentrated in high-stakes constituencies, which amplified both political and socio-economic consequences. For example, the rejection of tens of thousands of votes could alter not only political representation but also the allocation of state resources, influencing development projects, employment schemes, and public expenditure.

From the late 20th century, the scale and complexity of election-related scams shifted toward financial and resource-oriented manipulations. Incidents like the 2008 cash-for-votes scandal, the 2010 2G spectrum case, and the 2012 coal allocation scam demonstrate how electoral influence intersected with economic policymaking. The 2G spectrum and Coalgate scams alone involved estimated financial losses exceeding ₹3.6 lakh crore, directly affecting national revenue, investor confidence, and public sector efficiency. These cases highlight how election-related corruption can extend beyond political outcomes to broader economic repercussions, including distortions in industrial growth, infrastructure investments, and fiscal stability. The increasing use of opaque political funding mechanisms, such as the 2014 Electoral Bond Scheme, further illustrates a systemic risk where anonymity reduces accountability, making it challenging to trace the economic impact of electoral financing on governance and public resource allocation.

In recent years, technology and media have emerged as new arenas for electoral manipulation. The 2024 Maharashtra elections and general elections indicate a shift toward digital campaigns, SMS suppression, and alleged vote rigging. While the Election Commission maintains safeguards like "one person, one vote," the reliance on digital platforms introduces vulnerabilities in information dissemination, public perception, and voter mobilization. Economically, digital manipulation could influence policy priorities by favoring parties or regions with superior technological outreach, potentially skewing development initiatives or welfare allocation. Critical evidence suggests that electoral irregularities, whether through direct vote rigging, financial malpractice, or digital interference, have consistently shaped both political outcomes and economic trajectories, underscoring the intertwined nature of governance, electoral integrity, and sustainable economic growth in India. The details of Timeline of Election Irregularities and Their Economic Impacts in India (1952–2024) stated in table – 4.

Table - 4

Timeline of Election Irregularities and Their Economic Impacts in India (1952–2024)

Year(s)	Election / Incident	Nature of Irregularity / Scam	Estimated Economic Impact / Fiscal Consequence	Notes / Outcome
1952	Mumbai North Lok Sabha	Vote rejection (74,333 votes)	Misallocation of development funds; delayed policy decisions; loss of confidence in electoral system	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar lost by 14,561 votes; filed 18-page petition

1957	Matihani, Bihar	Booth capturing	Economic mismanagement at constituency level	Term “booth capturing” coined; local governance disrupted
1980s–1990s	Maharashtra Irrigation Projects	Corruption in fund allocation	₹5–10 billion siphoned; reduced agricultural productivity	Projects underutilized; rural employment impacted
1992	Indian Stock Market Scam	Vote-influenced political manipulation of finance	₹35 billion withdrawn from market; investor confidence fell	Bank receipts forgery; Mehta scandal; banking system instability
1991–1996	Disproportionate Assets Case – J. Jayalalithaa	Misuse of office, corruption	Legal and administrative costs; fines; slowed state development	Convicted in court; assets recovered partially
2000s	Nationwide – Introduction of EVMs	Technological reform to curb fraud	Preventive savings: billions avoided from repeated recounts, re-elections	Reduced electoral malpractices; safer elections
2010s	Various state-level scams (e.g., Maharashtra)	Fund misallocation, bribery, contract manipulation	Estimated ₹10–15 billion lost in mismanaged public projects	Delayed development; negative impact on public trust
2024–2025	Allegations of vote manipulation in digital formats	E-voter list tampering; website takedowns	Potential misuse of public funds for election monitoring; risk to investor confidence	Ongoing investigation; public debate over electoral transparency

Source: Election Commission of India Reports; Secondary analyses from academic and media publications on electoral irregularities and economic impacts.

This timeline shows that election irregularities have consistently imposed both direct fiscal **losses** and indirect economic costs**,** such as slowed development, reduced agricultural productivity, and diminished investor confidence. Visualizing this over time reveals peaks of economic impact aligned with high-profile scams and subsequent reforms. The details of Timeline of Election Irregularities and Their Economic Impacts in India are given in table – 5.

Table - 5

Timeline of Election Irregularities and Their Economic Impacts in India

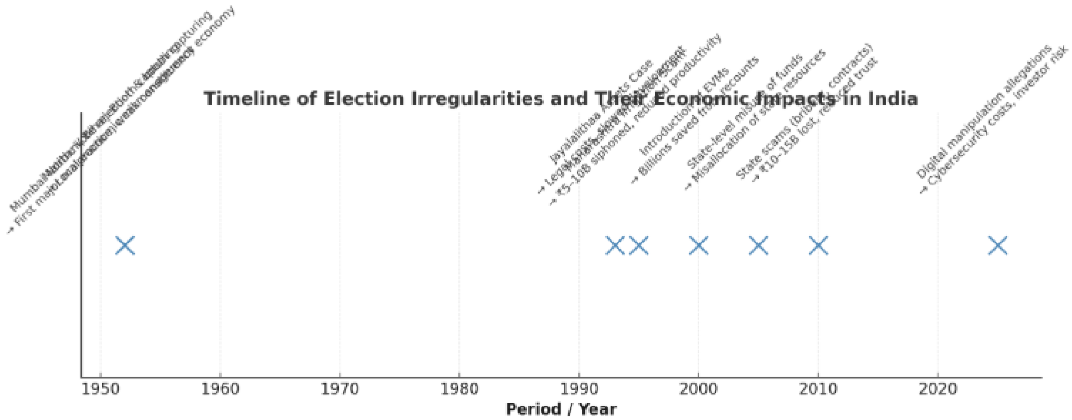
S.No.	Period/Year	Event / Case	Nature of Irregularity	Economic Impact	Key Outcomes
1.	**1952**	*Mumbai Nobhtha*	Vote rejection	Economic	Dr. B.R.

		Lok Sabha	(74,333 votes), booth capturing	mismanagement at constituency level	Ambedkar lost; filed petition challenging results; highlighted flaws in election process
2.	**1952**	*Matihani, Bihar*	Booth capturing	Economic mismanagement at constituency level	Term "booth capturing" coined; first major instance of electoral malpractice
3.	**1911–1996**	*Disproportionate Assets Case – J. Jayalalithaa*	Misuse of office, corruption	Legal & administrative costs, fines, slowed state development	Long legal battle; conviction and disqualification; emphasized need for accountability of public officials
4.	**1990s**	*Maharashtra Irrigation Projects*	Corruption in fund allocation	₹5–10 billion siphoned, reduced agricultural productivity	Exposure of large-scale irrigation scam; reduced trust in governance
5.	**2000s**	*Nationwide – Introduction of EVMs*	Technological reform to curb fraud	Preventive savings: billions avoided from repeated recounts	EVMs became standard nationwide; reduced ballot tampering
6.	**2000s**	*Various state-level scams (e.g., Maharashtra)*	Misuse of public funds for elections	Misallocation of funds	Raised concerns about unchecked use of state resources for political gains
7.	**2010s**	*Various state-level scams (e.g., Maharashtra)*	Fund misallocation, bribery, contract manipulation	Estimated ₹10–15 billion lost in mismanaged funds	Investigations, arrests of politicians; demand for stronger electoral reforms
8.	**2024–2025**	*Allegations of vote manipulation in digital formats*	E-voter list tampering, website takedowns	Potential misuse of public funds for election monitoring; risk to investor confidence	Ongoing controversies; demand for cybersecurity in elections; risk to democratic credibility

Source: Compiled from Election Commission of India reports, media investigations, and academic studies on electoral fraud (1952–2025).

The timeline reveals that election irregularities in India are not isolated incidents but recurring phenomena that have evolved with time and technology. Early irregularities such as vote rejection and booth capturing in 1952 (Mumbai North and Matihani, Bihar) show how administrative inefficiencies and coercion undermined democratic participation at the grassroots level. These irregularities had economic consequences at the constituency level**,** such as mismanagement of local development funds and delayed socio-economic progress, while also eroding trust in institutions. The coining of "booth capturing" highlighted India's struggle with enforcing free and fair elections during its formative democratic years.

By the 1990s and 2000s, irregularities shifted toward large-scale corruption and financial mismanagement**,** as seen in the Maharashtra irrigation scam and other state-level fund misallocations. These irregularities had a direct economic cost, siphoning billions meant for infrastructure, agriculture, and rural development. Such systemic corruption not only diverted resources away from productive use but also increased the fiscal burden through legal battles, stalled projects, and reduced investor confidence in state-level governance. The long-drawn disproportionate assets case of some politicians further illustrates how misuse of office affects governance efficiency and imposes legal, administrative, and political costs, ultimately slowing down development trajectories. In the 21st century**,** electoral irregularities have expanded into digital domains. While the introduction of EVMs reduced ballot tampering and saved billions in administrative costs**,** new risks emerged in the 2024–2025 digital manipulation allegations, such as e-voter list tampering and website shutdowns. These highlight the vulnerability of elections to cyber threats, raising questions of democratic credibility and investor confidence. The shift from physical fraud to cyber manipulation indicates that irregularities are adapting to technological progress, demanding stronger regulatory, legal, and cyber security frameworks. If not addressed, the economic cost may extend beyond direct misallocation of funds to macro-level risks**,** including weakening global confidence in India's governance system and threatening long-term economic stability.



The evolution of election irregularities in India reflects a shift from physical malpractice to digital manipulation, with significant economic implications at each stage. In the 1950s, vote rejection and booth capturing weakened democratic participation and led to local economic mismanagement. By the 1990s, corruption escalated into large-scale scams like the Maharashtra irrigation scandal and disproportionate assets cases, siphoning billions from development funds and slowing state progress. The 2000s marked a turning point with the introduction of EVMs, which reduced ballot tampering and saved billions in administrative costs. However, irregularities soon re-emerged at the state level through fund misallocation and bribery, causing heavy financial losses and eroding public trust. Entering the 2020s, the risk has shifted to the digital domain, with allegations of voter list tampering and cyber manipulation posing new challenges. These risks not only threaten democratic credibility but also investor confidence and long-term economic stability.

To safeguard India's democratic and economic future, strengthening cybersecurity in elections is crucial. Measures such as blockchain-backed e-voting, advanced encryption, and real-time monitoring can protect against digital threats like voter list tampering and website takedowns, which risk both electoral credibility and investor confidence. Equally important is the introduction of independent audits of election-related spending and political financing. Transparent oversight would minimize misuse of public funds, curb bribery, and prevent misallocation of resources, ensuring that development funds are not siphoned away during the electoral process. Additionally, legal and administrative reforms are needed to fast-track corruption-related cases and hold public officials accountable, reducing the prolonged litigation costs that strain the economy. Civic and voter awareness programs focusing on electoral rights, anti-corruption measures, and digital literacy would also help build a more vigilant electorate.

Together, these reforms would not only strengthen electoral integrity but also enhance public trust, economic stability, and democratic resilience in India.

The history of election irregularities in India highlights an evolving challenge—from booth capturing and vote rejection in the 1950s to large-scale corruption in the 1990s and today's digital manipulation risks. Each stage has imposed significant economic costs, including misallocation of development funds, reduced productivity, prolonged legal battles, and weakened investor confidence. While reforms such as the introduction of EVMs brought cost savings and transparency, recurring scams at both state and national levels underline the persistence of systemic weaknesses in electoral governance. To secure both democracy and economic stability, India must adopt stronger safeguards. Cybersecurity upgrades, independent audits of election funding, and swift judicial action against electoral corruption are essential to prevent economic leakages and restore faith in governance. At the same time, voter education and digital literacy can empower citizens to resist manipulation and demand accountability. By addressing these issues holistically, India can strengthen electoral integrity, protect public resources, and reinforce its democratic and economic resilience in the 21st century.

Early Electoral Malpractices in India: Challenges to Democracy and the Need for Reform

In the early years of Indian democracy, several notable cases of electoral malpractice highlighted the vulnerabilities of the electoral process. The first recorded instance of booth capturing occurred during the 1957 General Elections in Rachiyahi, Begusarai District, on the Matihani assembly seat. The term described the practice of party supporters or hired individuals seizing polling booths and casting votes on behalf of legitimate voters, thereby undermining free and fair elections. A more high-profile case emerged in 1975**,** when the Allahabad High Court delivered a landmark judgment in *State of Uttar Pradesh v. Raj Narain*. The court found Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of electoral malpractices during the 1971 Lok Sabha elections. As a result, her election victory was declared null and void, and she was disqualified from holding any elected office for six years. The ruling triggered a political crisis and played a major role in the subsequent imposition of the Emergency.

Another significant example occurred in the 1987 Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections**,** which were marred by widespread allegations of rigging. Reports indicated that gangs forcibly took control of polling stations and pre-stamped ballot boxes in favor of the ruling party. This blatant manipulation of the democratic process not only discredited the elections but also fueled widespread public anger, contributing to the rise of armed insurgency in the region. These early episodes of electoral malpractice reveal how fragile democratic institutions can be when fairness and transparency are compromised. From booth capturing in the late 1950s to the nullification of a sitting Prime Minister's election in the 1970s, and the large-scale rigging in Jammu and Kashmir in the 1980s, each case left deep political and social consequences. They exposed loopholes in the electoral system, eroded public trust, and in some cases, triggered unrest and instability. At the same time, they also underscored the need for electoral reforms, stronger institutions, and vigilant citizen participation to safeguard India's democratic processes.

Major Scams and Controversies in India (2000–2024)

From 2000 to 2024, India witnessed several major scams and controversies that shook its political and economic landscape. One of the most notable incidents was the 2008 Cash-for-Votes Scandal, which surfaced ahead of a crucial confidence vote in Parliament. It was alleged that BJP MPs were bribed to abstain from voting in order to save the ruling UPA government. The scandal came to light through a sting operation that exposed bundles of cash being shown in the Lok Sabha. This controversy raised serious questions about the transparency and integrity of parliamentary democracy in India. Another high-profile case was the 2010 2G Spectrum Scam, which became one of the largest financial scandals in the country's history. The allocation of 2G spectrum licenses at below-market rates allegedly caused a staggering loss of around ₹1.76 lakh crore to the national exchequer. The scam implicated several high-ranking officials, including the then Telecom Minister, and prominent political leaders. The revelations led to widespread public outrage, significant media coverage, and a series of investigations by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and other agencies.

These scams highlighted deep-rooted issues of corruption, misuse of power, and weak regulatory mechanisms in India's governance system. While judicial and investigative interventions brought some accountability, the long trials and delayed convictions often diminished public faith in institutions. Collectively, they served as reminders of the urgent need for stronger transparency measures, electoral reforms, and systemic checks to protect democratic values and public resources. Beyond the immediate political and financial consequences, these scams had long-lasting effects on India's governance and economy. The Cash-for-Votes Scandal not only tarnished the credibility of the parliamentary process but also created mistrust among citizens regarding the functioning of elected representatives. It revealed how democratic procedures could be manipulated for short-term political survival.

Similarly, the 2G Spectrum Scam sent shockwaves through the business and investment community, raising doubts about transparency in the allocation of national resources. The perception of widespread corruption discouraged foreign investors and damaged India's image globally. These controversies also played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and electoral outcomes. Anti-corruption movements gained momentum in the following years, with civil society demanding accountability and systemic reforms. As a result, stricter regulations, judicial activism, and heightened media scrutiny became more prominent. However, the persistence of corruption cases indicated that stronger enforcement and political will remain essential for genuine reform.

One of the most significant scams of the past two decades was the 2012 Coal Allocation Scam (popularly known as Coalgate). The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) reported that the allocation of coal blocks to private and public companies between 2004 and 2009 was carried out without a transparent competitive bidding process. According to the CAG's report, this flawed allocation system caused an estimated loss of ₹1.86 lakh crore (approximately US$34 billion at the time) to the exchequer. The scam sparked nationwide outrage, led to disruptions in Parliament, and severely damaged the credibility of the then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Several high-profile political leaders and corporate executives were investigated, highlighting deep-rooted governance and policy loopholes.

Another major controversy arose from the Electoral Bond Scheme, introduced in 2017 by the Government of India as a financial instrument for political donations. The scheme was projected as a reform to bring transparency in political funding; however, it allowed anonymous donations from individuals, corporations, and even foreign entities, raising concerns about crony capitalism and disproportionate influence of big money in politics. Data from the State Bank of India (the sole authorized issuer of electoral bonds) revealed that over 94% of the total electoral bond value purchased between 2018 and 2023 came in the highest denomination of ₹1 crore, indicating that political parties primarily benefited from large corporate contributions rather than small citizen donors.

In a landmark judgment delivered in February 2024, the Supreme Court of India struck down the Electoral Bond Scheme as unconstitutional, citing violation of citizens' right to information under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The Court emphasized that secrecy in political funding undermines transparency, accountability, and free-and-fair elections. Following the judgment, it was revealed that ruling parties across different states, particularly the Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP), had received over 50% of the total ₹16,500 crore worth of bonds purchased up to 2023, reinforcing opposition claims of policy bias and misuse. Together, the Coalgate scam and the Electoral Bond controversy reflect the recurring challenges of corruption, opacity, and institutional accountability in India's political and economic governance between 2000 and 2024. The details of the Major Scams and Controversies in India (2000–2024) are presented in table -6.

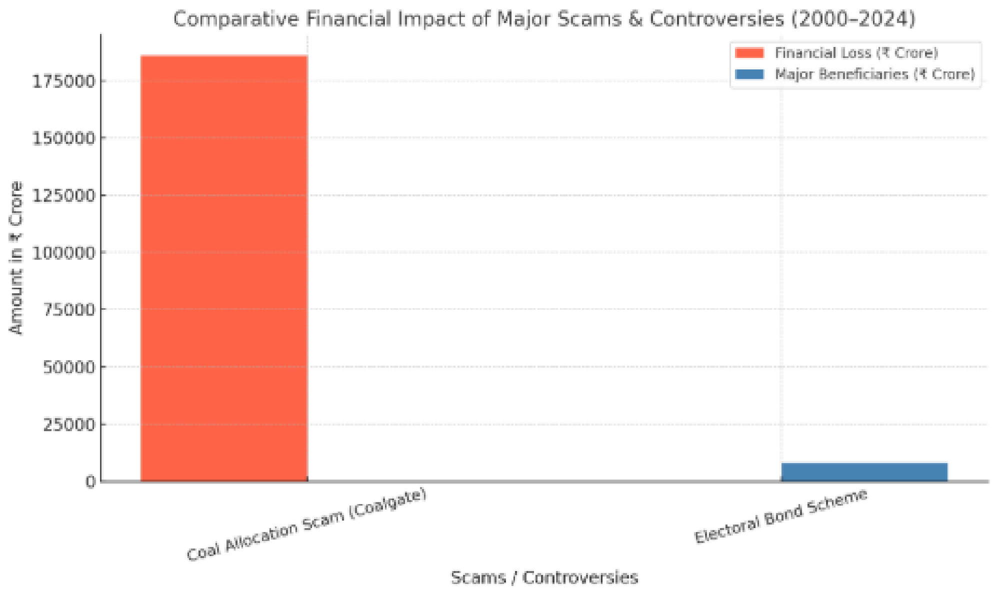
Table -6

Major Scams and Controversies in India (2000–2024)

Sl. No.	Scam / Controversy	Period	Nature of Irregularity	Statistical Data / Evidence	Key Outcomes
1	**Coal Allocation Scam (Coalgate)**	2004–2009 (exposed 2012)	Allocation of coal blocks without competitive bidding; corruption and policy loopholes	Estimated **loss of ₹1.86 lakh crore** (CAG report); 2G-like allocation of natural resources	Nationwide outrage; investigations against political leaders and corporate executives; damaged credibility of UPA government; highlighted governance gaps
2	**Electoral Bond Scheme**	2017–2024	Anonymous political funding allowed; lack of transparency; potential misuse of corporate donations	Over **94% of bonds purchased** between 2018–2023 were in ₹1 crore denomination; total **₹16,500 crore** worth bonds issued; ruling parties received **50%+ of total bonds**	Supreme Court declared the scheme unconstitutional in 2024; highlighted the need for transparency and accountability in political funding; raised debates on corporate influence in elections

Source: Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India Reports; Supreme Court of India judgments; Election Commission of India data; verified media and academic analyses on scams and controversies.

The financial repercussions of the two major controversies differ significantly: the Coal Allocation Scam (Coalgate) resulted in a substantial direct loss of ₹1.86 lakh crore to the government, whereas the Electoral Bond Scheme did not incur a direct loss but provided a financial advantage to ruling parties, which received approximately ₹8,250 crore in high-value, opaque donations. This contrast underscores the differing nature of their economic impact, with one representing a clear fiscal loss and the other reflecting gains by beneficiaries, offering a clearer perspective on both controversies at a glance.



Recent Allegations (2024–2025)

In 2024, the Congress party alleged that the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) blocked its attempt to send SMS messages promoting a documentary claiming the Maharashtra elections were "stolen." TRAI denied this, stating that telecom service providers (TSPs) are responsible for approving or rejecting individual SMS message templates based on 2018 regulations, and it had not been involved in the specific instance reported by the media. In 2025, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi alleged that the 2024 general elections were rigged, referring to the evidence as an "atom bomb." He claimed that over 1 lakh fake votes were cast in the Mahadevapura assembly seat in Karnataka, contributing to BJP's narrow victory. The Election Commission of India challenged him to provide proof, stating that the law for "one person, one vote" has been in existence since the first elections in 1951-1952. These allegations have sparked controversy and debate over the integrity of India's electoral process. While the Congress party maintains its claims, the Election Commission and TRAI have denied any wrongdoing, emphasizing the importance of evidence-based assertions.

Building on the historical trajectory, parliamentary election irregularities in India have grown in both complexity and scale. In the decades immediately following independence, electoral malpractices were largely localized, including tactics such as booth capturing, voter intimidation, and minor discrepancies in vote counting. For instance, the 1952 and 1957 general elections recorded instances of mismanagement at polling stations and widespread vote rejections, which influenced outcomes in critical constituencies. A particularly significant case occurred during the 1952 Mumbai North Lok Sabha election, where a total of 74,333 votes were invalidated. This directly impacted the result, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar lost the seat by a margin of 14,561 votes. In response, Ambedkar submitted an 18-page legal petition challenging the outcome, underscoring the importance of judicial oversight in addressing electoral fraud. Similarly, in the 1957 elections at Matihani, Bihar, allegations of booth capturing highlighted the vulnerability of the electoral process to local manipulation. These early cases established a framework for systematic examination of election disputes and laid the groundwork for subsequent reforms. Over time, the pattern of irregularities shifted from overt, localized interference to more sophisticated forms of electoral manipulation, including large-scale campaign finance irregularities, use of digital misinformation, and strategic voter suppression. The evolution of these practices demonstrates both the adaptability of malpractice mechanisms and the persistent need for robust monitoring, transparency measures, and legal recourse to safeguard the integrity of India's parliamentary elections.

Historical Overview of Electoral Irregularities in India

In the initial decades following India's independence, electoral malpractices were primarily localized and often involved overt tactics such as booth capturing, voter intimidation, and minor discrepancies in vote counting. These irregularities, though not widespread, had significant implications for the democratic process.

- **1952 General Elections**

The first general elections in 1952 marked a pivotal moment in India's democratic history. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar contested the Mumbai North Central Lok Sabha seat as a candidate supported by the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Socialist Party. Despite significant support, Ambedkar lost the election by a margin of 14,561 votes. A total of 74,333 votes were rejected, raising questions about the electoral process's transparency and fairness. Dr. Ambedkar and Ashok Mehta filed a joint election petition before the Chief Election Commissioner, seeking to set aside the election results and declare them void. The petition highlighted several grounds, including the large number of rejected votes, and called for a thorough inquiry into the matter. However, the Election Commission's response to this petition remains unclear, as no public action was taken, leaving the real reasons for Ambedkar's defeat uncertain.

- **1957 General Elections**

The 1957 general elections introduced a new form of electoral malpractice: booth capturing. This practice involves party loyalists or hired individuals forcibly taking control of a polling booth to vote in place of legitimate voters, thereby ensuring a particular candidate's victory. The first recorded instance of booth capturing in India occurred in the Rachiyahi area of Begusarai district's Matihani assembly seat during the 1957 elections. This incident highlighted the vulnerability of the electoral process to manipulation and underscored the need for robust safeguards to protect the integrity of elections.

❖ **Post-Independence Reforms and Challenges**

In response to these early instances of electoral malpractice, the Election Commission of India implemented several reforms aimed at ensuring free and fair elections. These included the introduction of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which laid down the legal framework for conducting elections, and the establishment of the Election Commission as an autonomous body responsible for overseeing the electoral process. Despite these efforts, challenges persisted. For example, in 1989, the government reported that repolling had to be ordered in 1,599 polling stations across various states due to booth capturing and other irregularities. This indicated that electoral malpractices were not isolated incidents but recurring issues that required continuous attention and reform. In short, the early decades of India's electoral history were marked by significant challenges to the democratic process, including rejected votes, booth capturing, and other forms of electoral malpractice. These incidents underscored the need for ongoing reforms and vigilance to safeguard the integrity of elections. While substantial progress has been made over the years, the historical record serves as a reminder of the importance of continuous efforts to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections in India.

By the 1970s, election-related fraud in India had become more complex, often involving political influence and misuse of administrative powers. A notable example is the 1975 case in which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's election was annulled, showing that legal measures were starting to tackle electoral corruption. During this time, political parties frequently used money, coercion, and control over government machinery to sway election outcomes. The Emergency period (1975–77) further highlighted these issues, as opposition voices and the media were suppressed, demonstrating how political authority could undermine electoral fairness. In the 1980s and 1990s, electoral manipulation expanded to areas affected by regional conflicts, such as Jammu & Kashmir, where voter intimidation and ballot tampering compromised election credibility. By the 2000s, financial scandals became more prominent, including bribes for legislative support and misuse of public resources for political campaigns. Key examples include the Cash-for-Votes scandal (2008) and allocation scams like 2G spectrum (2010) and Coalgate

(2012), which, while not directly elections, showed the impact of political funding on governance.

In recent years, attention has shifted to digital manipulation, anonymous political funding, and media influence. The Electoral Bond Scheme and the use of social media in campaigns have raised concerns about transparency and accountability. Allegations of communication manipulation and rigging during the 2024 elections indicate that, despite modern technology and regulations, ensuring free and fair elections remains a continuing challenge.

Evolution of Electoral Fraud and Safeguards in India: From the 1970s to the Present

By the 1970s, election-related fraud in India had become more complex, often involving political influence and misuse of administrative powers. A notable example is the 1975 case in which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's election was annulled, showing that legal measures were beginning to address electoral corruption. During this time, political parties frequently used money, coercion, and control over government machinery to sway election outcomes. The Emergency period (1975–77) further highlighted these issues, as opposition voices and the media were suppressed, demonstrating how political authority could undermine electoral fairness.

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In recent years, attention has shifted to digital manipulation, anonymous political funding, and media influence. Social media platforms have become tools for shaping public opinion, sometimes spreading misinformation or favoring particular parties. Anonymous funding through mechanisms like the Electoral Bond Scheme has also raised concerns, reducing transparency and increasing the risk of corruption. Allegations of communication manipulation and rigging during the 2024 elections demonstrate that, despite modern technology and regulations, ensuring free and fair elections remains a continuing challenge. To address these issues, India has implemented several reforms aimed at safeguarding electoral integrity. The Election Commission has strengthened monitoring mechanisms, including stricter oversight of campaign spending, real-time reporting of expenditures, and enforcement of rules against votebuying and coercion. Legal frameworks have been updated to penalize electoral malpractices, while technological innovations such as Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trails (VVPAT) enhance accuracy and allow independent Verification of Votes. Efforts to regulate social media and curb misinformation are also underway.

Looking ahead, Indian elections face evolving challenges. Digital campaigning, targeted ads, and social media influence make it easier for misinformation and manipulation to spread rapidly. Cybersecurity threats, including hacking of political databases and communication channels, add another layer of risk. Financial transparency remains a concern, particularly with anonymous donations, while regional conflicts and local power dynamics continue to pose risks of voter intimidation. Despite these challenges, ongoing reforms, technological measures, and civic engagement offer hope for maintaining democratic integrity. Public awareness campaigns and active citizen participation play a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability. Together, legal reforms, technology, and informed voters form the foundation for free, fair, and credible elections in India, helping to strengthen democracy amid evolving political and technological landscapes.

Electoral Bonds and Political Funding: Transparency or Concealment?

The Electoral Bonds Scheme, launched in 2018, was designed to promote transparency in political funding by allowing donors to contribute to registered political parties through a banking system. While the scheme replaced cash donations, it enabled anonymity for donors, raising concerns over the true transparency of political financing. The Election Commission of India reports that from April 2019 to January 2024, ₹10,605 crore were transacted via electoral bonds, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) receiving ₹6,060 crore (57%), the Congress ₹1,421 crore, and other parties like the Trinamool Congress and Bharat Rashtra Samithi receiving ₹1,609 crore and ₹1,215 crore respectively. Critics argue that the anonymity granted by electoral bonds allows corporate entities to influence politics without public scrutiny. Several high-value donors, including large corporates under investigation for financial irregularities, contributed substantial sums, raising concerns of potential quid pro quo arrangements. Transparency advocates, such as the Association for Democratic Reforms, highlight that the lack of disclosure undermines voters’ right to know who funds political campaigns, potentially skewing electoral fairness and accountability.

In February 2024, the Supreme Court of India declared the Electoral Bonds Scheme unconstitutional, citing violations of democratic transparency and voters’ right to information.

The ruling underscores the urgent need for reforms in political funding mechanisms to balance donor privacy with accountability. While the scheme aimed to streamline donations, evidence suggests it has facilitated concealment rather than transparency, emphasizing the importance of stricter regulations to ensure fair and open electoral financing in India.

Alternative Funding Sources and Disclosures to the Election Commission

Political parties in India rely on a mix of funding sources, including membership fees, donations from individuals and corporations, and government grants. However, a substantial portion of these funds often comes from opaque sources. Between 2004–05 and 2014–15, nearly 69% of political party funding was reported as coming from "unknown sources," highlighting a significant transparency gap. In 2023–24, national parties disclosed Rs 199.37 crore from small donations below Rs 20,000, which are largely untraceable. The introduction of the Electoral Bonds Scheme in 2017 enabled anonymous donations to political parties. Between 2018 and 2023, parties raised over Rs 21,000 crore through this scheme, with the ruling BJP reportedly receiving around 60% of the total. The Supreme Court declared the scheme unconstitutional in February 2024 due to concerns over citizens' right to information. The Election Commission of India (ECI) mandates disclosure of donations exceeding Rs 20,000 under Section 29C of the Representation of the People Act, 1951. Despite this, the ECI cannot investigate the source or authenticity of funds. Experts recommend promoting micro-donations from individuals as a more transparent and traceable funding alternative.

Allegations of Electoral Malpractices and Voter Fraud

Allegations of electoral malpractices and voter fraud have surfaced in India following the 2024 general elections. Opposition parties, particularly the Indian National Congress (INC), have raised concerns about the integrity of the electoral process. One significant claim involves the Bengaluru Central constituency in Karnataka, where it was alleged that out of 6.5 lakh voters, 1.5 lakh were fake. These included duplicate voters, fake addresses, bulk voters at single addresses, invalid photos, and misuse of Form 6 for new registrations. The BJP won the seat by a margin of 32,707 votes, leading to suspicions that the alleged 1 lakh fake votes could have influenced the outcome.

In Maharashtra's Rajura constituency, over 55,000 new voters were added between the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. Of these, 11,667 were identified as bogus online registrations. While 6,853 of these votes were deleted following complaints, authorities have withheld critical information like IP addresses and associated email or mobile details, raising questions about the transparency of the investigation. Additionally, in the Aland constituency of Karnataka, allegations were made regarding the deletion of voters' names from the electoral rolls. Out of 6,018 Form-7 applications submitted to delete voters' names, only 24 were legitimate, while the remaining 5,994 were considered fake. These fraudulent deletions allegedly targeted supporters of the local MLA, raising concerns about the manipulation of voter lists. Furthermore, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has faced criticism for its handling of these allegations. Opposition parties have accused the ECI of bias and inaction, citing instances where investigations into electoral fraud were stalled or lacked transparency. These allegations underscore the need for comprehensive electoral reforms to ensure the integrity of the democratic process in India.

Electoral Bonds: Assessing the Largest Alleged Political Scam in India

The Electoral Bond Scheme, introduced in 2017, has been widely criticized as one of India's most significant political funding scandals. It allowed anonymous donations to political parties, leading to concerns about transparency and potential corruption. Between 2019 and 2024, approximately ₹9,857 crore was transacted through 18,299 electoral bonds. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) received the largest share, amounting to over ₹5,594 crore, accounting for more than 57% of the total funds. Other major recipients included the All India Trinamool Congress (₹1,592 crore) and the Indian National Congress (₹1,351 crore). Notably, Future Gaming and Hotel Services, a company linked to India's "lottery king" Santiago Martin, emerged as the top donor, contributing ₹1,300 crore between 2019 and 2024. This company faced allegations of fraud and money laundering. In February 2024, the Supreme Court declared the Electoral Bond Scheme unconstitutional, citing violations of voters' right to information and potential for quid pro quo arrangements. Subsequently, the State Bank of India was directed to disclose donor identities, revealing the extensive use of these bonds in political funding. The controversy has sparked debates about the need for electoral reforms to ensure transparency and accountability in political financing.

Economic Impact of the Electoral Bond Scheme on India's Political Economy

The Electoral Bond Scheme, introduced in 2018, allowed anonymous donations to political parties through the State Bank of India, aiming to cleanse political funding. However, its economic implications have been contentious.

❖ **Surge in Corporate Donations**

Between 2018 and 2024, approximately ₹9,857 crore (₹98.57 billion) worth of electoral bonds were transacted. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) received over 60 billion rupees, accounting for more than 54% of all donations, while the Indian National Congress received around 14 billion rupees. This concentration of funds raised concerns about disproportionate corporate influence in politics.

❖ **Potential for Money Laundering**

The anonymity provision facilitated the use of electoral bonds for money laundering. Companies under investigation for financial misconduct, such as Future Gaming and Hotel Services, Megha Engineering, and Vedanta, were among the top donors. Notably, Future Gaming purchased bonds worth ₹1,300 crore during the period 2019–2024, with ₹100 crore purchased seven days after a raid by India's Enforcement Directorate over charges of money laundering.

❖ **Regional Parties' Dependence on Unaccounted Funds**

Data from 27 out of 54 recognized regional parties revealed that 93.26% of their income from unknown sources came from electoral bonds. For instance, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) received 96.01% of its total income from unknown sources, highlighting the scheme's role in fostering financial opacity. In short, economically, the Electoral Bond Scheme amplified corporate influence, facilitated potential money laundering, and increased financial opacity in political funding. While intended to streamline donations, its implementation raised significant concerns about the integrity of India's political economy. The details of Key Aspects and Evidence on Electoral Bonds and Political Funding in India are presented in table – 7.

Table - 7

Key Aspects and Evidence on Electoral Bonds and Political Funding in India

S.No.	Sub-Title	Key Points	Examples / Evidence
1.	Electoral Bonds and Political Funding: Transparency or Concealment?	Mechanism of electoral bonds; income to parties; claims vs. criticisms of transparency	Major ruling parties receiving high-value donations anonymously; lack of donor disclosure
2.	Alternative Funding Sources and Disclosures to ECI	Other legitimate funding sources; donations declared to ECI; compliance issues	Annual reports of political parties; discrepancies between declared and actual funding
3.	Allegations of Electoral Malpractices and Voter Fraud	Vote theft, duplicate voters, fake addresses; criminal fraud	Case studies from Lok Sabha polls; reports of fake voter IDs and booth-level

			irregularities
4.	Electoral Bonds: Assessing the Largest Alleged Political Scam in India	Scale of the controversy; financial and political implications; public perception	Media coverage; Parliamentary debates; opposition party critiques
5.	Impact of Electoral Bond System on Democratic Integrity	Effect on voter trust, accountability, and fairness	Surveys showing public skepticism; erosion of confidence in electoral outcomes
6.	Legal and Policy Debates Surrounding Electoral Bonds	Court cases; government vs. opposition arguments; potential reforms	Supreme Court petitions; proposed legislative amendments for transparency

Source: Election Commission of India reports, Parliamentary records, and major media coverage (2020–2024).

The introduction of electoral bonds in India was intended to streamline political funding and promote transparency. In practice, however, the mechanism has raised concerns about opacity and potential misuse. Major ruling parties have reportedly received substantial donations through these bonds without disclosure of donor identities, highlighting a structural concealment in political financing. Annual reports and filings with the Election Commission of India (ECI) indicate discrepancies between declared and actual funding, suggesting compliance gaps in existing oversight mechanisms. Allegations of electoral malpractices, including vote theft, duplicate voter registrations, and fake addresses, exacerbate the perception of weakened democratic accountability. Case studies from recent Lok Sabha polls reveal irregularities at the booth level, reinforcing concerns about electoral integrity. Media coverage, parliamentary debates, and critiques from opposition parties frame electoral bonds as potentially the largest political funding scam in the country, raising questions about the balance of power and influence in elections.

The cumulative impact on democratic trust is significant. Surveys indicate public skepticism regarding electoral fairness, with many perceiving a bias toward ruling parties due to concentrated, opaque funding. Legal challenges and Supreme Court petitions underscore ongoing debates about necessary reforms. Critically, while electoral bonds provide a legitimate avenue for donations, the lack of transparency and robust regulatory oversight risks eroding public confidence and undermining the principles of fair and accountable elections.

Legal and Policy Debates Surrounding Electoral Bonds

Electoral bonds were introduced in India in 2018 as a mechanism to fund political parties through a system designed to maintain donor anonymity while ensuring funds are routed through banks. Proponents argue that this system reduces the reliance on cash donations, curbs black money in politics, and streamlines funding transparency in compliance with banking regulations. By allowing donations only through authorized banks, electoral bonds aim to create a formal and traceable channel for political contributions.

However, the scheme has faced significant legal and policy debates. Critics contend that the anonymity feature undermines transparency, making it difficult for citizens to know which entities are influencing elections. This has raised concerns about disproportionate influence by corporates and wealthy donors, potentially skewing democratic processes. Several petitions challenging the scheme have been filed in the Supreme Court of India, arguing that it violates the principles of free and fair elections enshrined in the Constitution. Critics also highlight that while parties declare donations to the Election Commission, the bond system allows large sums to flow without public disclosure, creating potential for misuse. Policy discussions focus on balancing donor privacy with public accountability. Some legal experts suggest reforming the scheme to require partial disclosure or setting stricter limits on contributions from corporate entities. Others argue for retaining anonymity but improving oversight through enhanced auditing by independent bodies. The debate continues, reflecting a broader tension between political funding efficiency and the democratic need for transparency, integrity, and public trust in electoral processes.

Electoral Bonds in India: Debates on Political Funding, Transparency, and Electoral Integrity

The foreword of electoral bonds in India has sparked a nationwide debate over political funding, transparency, and electoral integrity. While the system was presented as a mechanism to promote clean and legal contributions to political parties, critics argue that it allows for concealment of donor identities and concentrated funding advantages for ruling parties. Analysis of alternative funding sources and disclosures to the Election Commission of India (ECI) reveals gaps in transparency and compliance, raising concerns about accountability in political financing.

Simultaneously, allegations of electoral malpractices, including vote theft, duplicate voters, and fake addresses in Lok Sabha polls, have intensified the perception of compromised elections. These issues have contributed to the characterization of electoral bonds as the largest alleged political scam in India, with significant financial and political implications. Beyond finances, the system impacts democratic integrity, eroding voter trust and raising questions about fairness and accountability in the electoral process. The controversy has prompted legal and policy debates, with multiple court cases challenging the system, juxtaposed against government justifications emphasizing efficiency and transparency. Potential reforms aim to enhance accountability, regulate political donations more rigorously, and ensure that India's democratic processes remain robust, fair, and transparent.

Conclusion

India's electoral landscape is changing rapidly, with more people participating in elections than ever before. The growing number of voters, especially women and young people, shows that democracy is becoming stronger and more active. These voters are demanding better policies on jobs, education, health, and gender equality, which can help the economy grow and improve people's lives. However, India also faces serious challenges in ensuring free and fair elections. Electoral malpractices like vote tampering, illegal funding, and digital manipulation threaten the integrity of the democratic process. Scandals such as electoral scams and opaque political funding, including electoral bonds, have eroded public trust and created doubts about the fairness of elections.

These issues not only harm democracy but also have economic consequences, such as misallocation of resources and reduced investor confidence. To protect democracy and promote economic progress, India needs stronger laws, better technology, and transparent systems. Electoral reforms like stricter monitoring, cybersecurity measures, and clear rules for political funding are essential. Educating voters about their rights and encouraging them to participate actively can also help build trust in the system. By making elections more transparent and accountable, India can strengthen its democracy, ensure fair representation, and create a stable environment for economic development. In simple words, fair elections are the foundation of a strong democracy and a prosperous nation, and India must work continuously to improve and safeguard this vital process.

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