



The Role of Political Parties in Strengthening Democratic Governance in India

Dr. KAMAL KUMAR BHARIA

Assistant professor of political science, S.K. Govt. Girls college, sikar (raj.)

Abstract

Political parties play a fundamental role in strengthening democratic governance in India by connecting citizens with government institutions, facilitating political participation, and ensuring accountability in the decision-making process. As a representative parliamentary democracy, India relies on political parties to mobilise public opinion, contest elections, formulate policies, represent diverse social interests, and contribute to the formation and functioning of governments. This research examines the role of political parties in promoting democratic values, institutional transparency, public accountability, inclusive representation, and effective governance in the Indian political system. It explores how political parties contribute to electoral participation, legislative deliberations, policy formulation, and the representation of marginalised communities. The study also analyses major challenges affecting their democratic functioning, including the influence of money and muscle power, criminalisation of politics, corruption, dynastic leadership, ideological polarisation, and the limited practice of internal party democracy. Furthermore, it considers the significance of electoral reforms, transparent political funding, organisational accountability, ethical political leadership, and active citizen participation in improving democratic institutions. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including books, scholarly articles, government reports, constitutional provisions, and relevant institutional publications. It seeks to understand the relationship between political party functioning and the quality of democratic governance in India.

Keywords: Political Parties, Democratic Governance, Electoral Reforms, Political Accountability, Indian Democracy.

1. Introduction

India is the world's largest democracy by electorate, having adopted a written Constitution in 1950 and holding frequent national and state elections. The key elements of democratic governance in India are universal adult franchise, Parliamentary form of government, Independence of the Election Commission, and a federal division of powers between Union and the states (Tillin, 2015). What made the experiment so special was that it started in an environment where the society was extremely poor, illiterate and highly hierarchical – all factors that theory would describe as being against a country's ability to survive as a democracy.



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A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

The continuity of the system, despite of a major break during the Emergency (1975-77), has made India one of the key case studies in the study of democratic consolidation (Mitra, 2017). Elections, however, are not a panacea for good governance. Governance is based on the ability of elected representatives to translate popular preferences into policy, the checks that institutions impose on arbitrary power, and the capacity of citizens to hold rulers to account. Political parties are the key institutions linking these functions and therefore party behavior is an important aspect of any measure of the quality of India's democracy.

A political party is an organised group of people who have a common programme, ideology or social base and compete against each other in elections for public offices. Parties pool a variety of interests into policy options, train and fill leaders, and provide resources for filling legislatures and executive branches. Parties have an added burden of translating the social diversity of a country like India with its divers languages, religions, castes and regional identities into political representation (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

Institutional importance is also in their importance. The Constitution does not make much mention of parties, but the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and the Tenth Schedule, which was inserted in 1985, recognize the role of parties. Parties and symbols appear on the ballot, legislators vote according to party lines and governments are established through party or party alliance. The parties are thus the machinery of India's democracy, and not an add-on. Parties participate in all aspects of the democratic process. They choose candidates prior to elections, shape issues, mobilise voters, finance elections, form governments after elections, remain in opposition after elections, and interface with citizens and hold the executive accountable between elections. Electoral studies of India indicate that party identity, leadership appeal and party organisation remain significant in determining electoral outcomes over caste, community and local factors (Palshikar et al, 2017).

The quality of the democratic process thus hinges on the quality of the parties. In the first case of programmatic and accountable parties, they enhance governance; in the second case of personalised, opaque or money and muscle driven parties, they can diminish it. In the following paper, both are considered.

The study has three key points of interest. First, India's democracy is talked about in terms of its resilience and challenges, and parties are at the epicentre of these both sides of the narrative (Jaffrelot, 2021). Second, the recent debates on party financing, criminalisation of politics and representation of women in politics need to understand what is provided by the party and where gaps in the institutional process are there (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2018). Thirdly, the paper gathers together in a single framework conceptual, historical and empirical material which can be used by students, researchers and policy makers to evaluate proposals for enhancing democratic governance. The analysis is based on secondary sources, published election related information and reports from the Election Commission of India and Association for Democratic Reforms.



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2. Political Parties and Democratic Governance: Conceptual Framework

Democratic governance refers to the exercise of public authority in ways that respect popular sovereignty, the rule of law, participation, transparency and accountability. It combines two dimensions: a procedural dimension, concerning free and fair elections and peaceful transfers of power, and a substantive dimension, concerning whether government is responsive, effective and inclusive. India performs strongly on the procedural dimension, with high and rising turnout and credible electoral administration, but evidence on the substantive dimension is more mixed (Kapur, Mehta & Vaishnav, 2017).

Governance in this sense is not only the work of the executive. It involves legislatures, courts, regulators, local governments and civil society, all operating within rules that parties help to make and enforce. Parties are the actors that carry citizens' demands into these institutions.

2.1 Meaning and Functions of Political Parties

Political science identifies several core functions of parties: interest aggregation, candidate recruitment, political socialisation, mobilisation, policy formulation, government formation and opposition. Table 1 summarises these functions and links each to a democratic outcome.

Table 1: Functions of political parties and their democratic outcomes

Function	What parties do in practice	Democratic outcome
Interest aggregation	Combine local and group demands into a manifesto	Manageable, comparable policy choices
Candidate recruitment	Select and finance candidates for elections	Pool of leaders and representatives
Mobilisation	Register, persuade and bring voters to polling booths	Higher turnout and participation
Policy formulation	Draft legislation and programmes in government or opposition	Responsive lawmaking
Government formation	Win majorities or build coalitions	Stable, legitimate executive
Opposition and scrutiny	Question ministers, debate bills, expose failures	Accountability and checks on power

Source: Compiled by the author from Chhibber & Verma (2018) and Mitra (2017).

In India these functions are performed unevenly. Some parties maintain extensive cadre organisations, while others rely mainly on a single leader or a family network. Variation in organisational strength helps explain why parties differ in their capacity to deliver governance.

2.2 Relationship Between Political Parties and Democracy

The relationship between parties and democracy is one of mutual dependence. Democracy requires organised competition for power, and parties supply it. At the same time, democratic rules, such as free elections, press freedom and an independent judiciary, define the space in



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which parties operate. When this balance holds, competition disciplines parties and parties give citizens a practical way to exercise choice.

The relationship can also turn adverse. Dominant parties may use state resources to entrench themselves, and personalised parties may weaken internal debate. Scholars of the Indian case have noted both the democratic energy generated by party competition and the risk of majoritarian or clientelist tendencies (Jaffrelot, 2021; Thachil, 2014).

2.3 Political Representation and Citizen Participation

Representation links the preferences of citizens to the composition of legislatures. In India, parties have broadened representation by bringing historically excluded groups into politics, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. Reservation of legislative seats for Scheduled Castes and Tribes has had measurable effects on policy and on the inclusion of minorities in party structures (Jensenius, 2017).

Participation extends beyond voting. Citizens attend party meetings, join campaigns, approach local party workers for help with state services and protest through party-linked organisations. Research on rural India shows that citizens often claim welfare entitlements through a mix of party contacts and direct engagement with officials, which indicates that parties are one among several channels of participation (Kruks-Wisner, 2018).

3. Evolution of Political Parties in India

The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, began as a forum for educated Indians to petition the colonial government and became a mass movement under Gandhi's leadership from 1920. The Muslim League, the Communist Party of India, the Hindu Mahasabha and later the Socialist groups emerged alongside it, each representing a distinct social base and programme. The freedom movement thus created both a dominant national organisation and the seeds of a plural party landscape (Mitra, 2017).

Congress's role as an umbrella organisation gave it unmatched legitimacy at independence. Its early leaders also chose to accept parliamentary democracy, competitive elections and universal franchise, a decision that shaped the relationship between parties and the state for decades.

India's party system has passed through distinct phases, summarised in Table 2. After independence, Congress dominated national and most state politics, while opposition parties remained fragmented. The 1967 elections broke this dominance in several states, and the following decades brought greater competition, the rise of regional and caste-based parties, and the end of single-party majorities at the centre in 1989.

Table 2: Phases in the evolution of India's party system

Phase	Period	Main features
Congress dominance	1947–1967	One-party dominance; Congress as a broad coalition; weak and divided opposition



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Erosion and competition	1967–1989	Rise of state-level opposition; split in Congress; centralisation under Indira Gandhi; Emergency of 1975–77
Coalition era	1989–2014	Mandal and Mandir politics; rise of regional and caste-based parties; alliance governments such as NDA and UPA
Dominant-party resurgence	2014 onward	Single-party majorities under the BJP in 2014 and 2019; leader-centred campaigns; stronger organisation and funding

Source: Compiled by the author from Chhibber & Verma (2018), Ruparelia (2015) and Palshikar, Kumar & Lodha (2017).

The multi-party system has expanded access to power, but it has also encouraged fragmentation. Hundreds of registered parties contest elections, and only a few have national reach (Election Commission of India, 2019).

3.1 National and Regional Political Parties

The Election Commission recognises parties as national or state parties based on vote share and seats won. National parties such as the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist parties compete across multiple states, while regional parties such as the Trinamool Congress, the Dravida parties of Tamil Nadu and the Biju Janata Dal anchor politics in particular states. Ziegfeld (2016) argues that regional parties flourish where political elites find it advantageous to build local clientelist networks and where national parties are weak.

Regional parties have strengthened federalism by giving linguistic and cultural communities a political voice and by bargaining with the Union government over resources and powers (Tillin, 2015). They have also been criticised for dynastic leadership, a theme discussed in Section 5.3.

3.2 Coalition Politics and Democratic Governance

From 1989 to 2014, no single party won a majority in the Lok Sabha, and governments were formed by pre- or post-poll coalitions. Ruparelia (2015) argues that coalition politics made governance more consultative and increased the bargaining power of regional parties, but also created problems of policy compromise and frequent instability in the early years. Despite this, the NDA and UPA coalitions governed for full terms and carried out significant economic and social reforms.

Coalitions had a democratic side effect: they forced national parties to negotiate with regional and social-group representatives. When single-party majorities returned in 2014 and 2019, this restraint weakened, and debate shifted to how far executive dominance fits with the federal and deliberative character of Indian democracy (Sridharan, 2014).

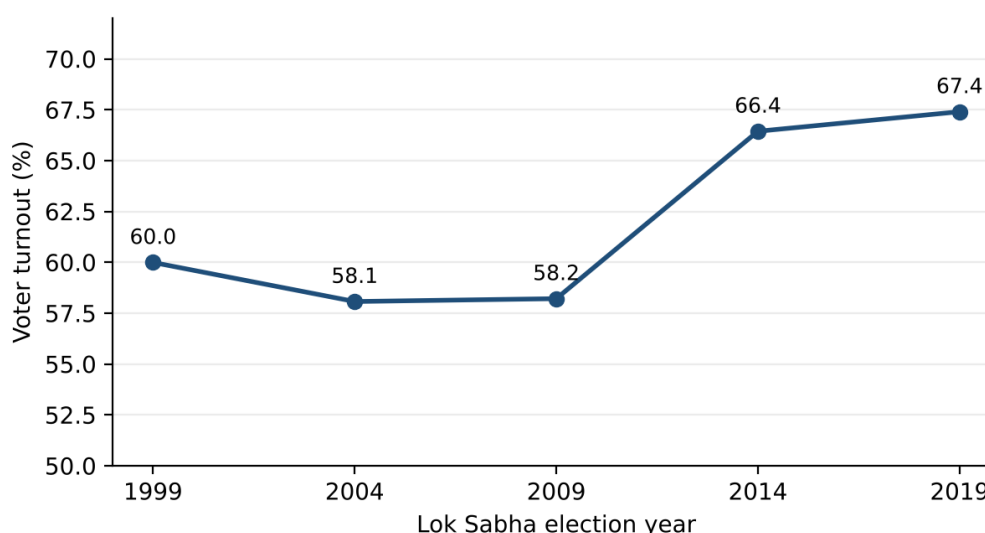


3.3 Changing Nature of Political Competition

Political competition in India has changed in several ways. Campaigns have become more leader-centred and media-driven, with heavy use of television, social media and data analytics (Jaffrelot, 2015). Welfare delivery and direct benefit transfers have become central electoral themes, and parties compete over who can deliver services most credibly. Identity politics, particularly around religion, has also taken on greater weight, a trend that scholars link to the rise of Hindu nationalism and the changed strategies of rival parties (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020).

Voter participation has risen alongside these shifts. As Figure 1 shows, national turnout increased from about 58 per cent in 2004 and 2009 to more than 66 per cent in 2014 and 67 per cent in 2019.

Figure 1: Voter turnout in Lok Sabha elections, 1999–2019 (per cent)



Source: Election Commission of India (2019) and earlier statistical reports.

4. Role of Political Parties in Strengthening Democratic Governance

4.1 Political Representation and Social Inclusion

Parties have been the main vehicle for including marginalised groups. The Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal and other parties built their support on Dalit and backward-class mobilisation, bringing leaders from these communities into state governments and legislatures. This widened the social base of the political elite compared with the early decades after independence (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

Gender representation remains weaker. As Figure 2 shows, the number of women in the Lok Sabha rose from 58 in 2009 to 78 in 2019, or from about 11 to 14 per cent of members, but this is still low by international comparison. Reserved seats have increased representation for



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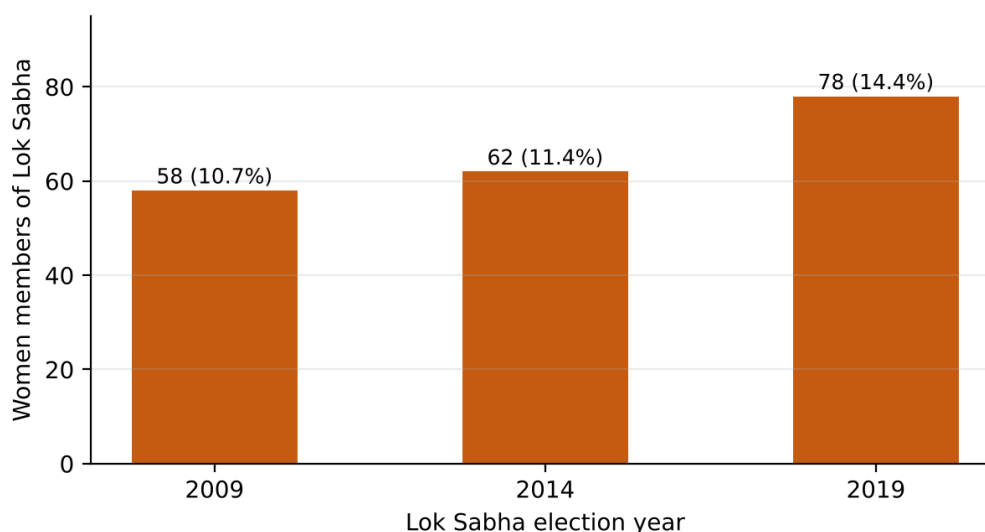
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Scheduled Castes and Tribes, yet women's reservation in legislatures remains unresolved (Jensenius, 2017).

Figure 2: Women members of the Lok Sabha, 2009–2019



Source: Compiled from Election Commission of India (2019) statistical reports.

4.2 Mobilisation of Citizens and Political Participation

Parties mobilise voters through local workers, community networks, rallies and, increasingly, digital platforms. Thachil (2014) shows that the BJP built support among poor voters partly by working through affiliated organisations that provide social services, illustrating how parties can combine welfare provision with political mobilisation. Banerjee (2014) similarly finds that Indian voters respond to a mixture of party loyalty, local information and community ties rather than to a single motive.

Party-led mobilisation has contributed to rising participation among groups that once voted at lower rates, including women and rural poor, and to record turnout in 2014 and 2019 (Election Commission of India, 2019).

4.3 Policy Formulation and Legislative Processes

Parties translate manifestos into legislation. Governments introduce most bills, and parliamentary parties decide their positions through party meetings and whips. Major policy changes, such as economic liberalisation after 1991, the right to information, rural employment guarantee and the Goods and Services Tax, passed through party negotiations in Parliament and state legislatures (Kapur, Mehta & Vaishnav, 2017).

The weakness lies in deliberation. Strict party discipline under the anti-defection law leaves little room for individual legislators to differ, and committee scrutiny of bills varies across parliaments. Strong parties give stability to lawmaking, but they can also reduce independent legislative debate.



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4.4 Formation and Functioning of Governments

Elections in India produce governments through parties. Under single-party majorities, the winning party forms the Union or state government directly; under hung verdicts, parties negotiate alliances based on seat-sharing and common programmes. Table 3 shows that parties with similar vote shares can obtain very different seat totals because of the first-past-the-post system. In 2019 the BJP won 303 seats with 37.4 per cent of votes, while the Congress won 52 seats with 19.5 per cent.

Table 3: Lok Sabha results for selected parties, 2014 and 2019

Party	2014 seats	2014 vote share (%)	2019 seats	2019 vote share (%)
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	282	31.3	303	37.4
Indian National Congress (INC)	44	19.3	52	19.5
All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	34	3.8	22	4.1
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	0	4.2	10	3.7

Source: Election Commission of India (2019); figures rounded to one decimal place.

Once in office, party leadership shapes how governments function. Cabinet composition, relations with the bureaucracy and the pace of reform depend largely on the party structure behind the government. Strong single-party governments can act quickly, while coalition governments rely more on negotiation.

4.5 Opposition Parties and Government Accountability

A credible opposition is essential to democratic accountability. Opposition parties question ministers in Parliament, use committees to examine legislation, challenge government actions in courts and offer alternative programmes to voters. Their effectiveness depends on their numbers, unity and organisation. Following the decline of Congress in 2014 and 2019, the national opposition has been smaller and more fragmented, which has raised concern about parliamentary scrutiny (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Regional opposition parties continue to govern many states and thus provide a federal check on the Union government. This pattern shows that opposition operates not only in Parliament but also through state-level power (Tillin, 2015).

4.6 Political Education and Public Awareness

Parties educate citizens about public issues through manifestos, speeches, media and local meetings. They also help citizens understand how to claim benefits and rights. Singh (2015) shows that in states where parties successfully built a shared regional identity, such as Kerala, public attention to welfare and social development has been stronger, indicating that political narratives can shape state capacity.



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The educational role has limits. Campaign messages can be selective or misleading, and the growth of social media has made misinformation a concern. Parties therefore carry a responsibility to inform as well as persuade.

5. Political Parties and Democratic Accountability

5.1 Electoral Accountability

Elections are the primary tool through which citizens reward or punish parties. Indian voters have often voted out incumbents, a pattern sometimes described as anti-incumbency, and performance on prices, jobs, welfare delivery and corruption has influenced results (Palshikar, Kumar & Lodha, 2017). Free and fair elections, overseen by the Election Commission, make this accountability possible.

Electoral accountability is weakened when voters lack information about candidates, when money influences outcomes, or when identity appeals override performance. Vaishnav (2017) shows that voters sometimes support candidates with criminal records because they see them as able to deliver benefits in a context of weak state capacity.

5.2 Legislative Accountability

Legislative accountability depends on Parliament's ability to scrutinise the executive. In practice, party discipline and the anti-defection law mean that legislators of the ruling party seldom challenge their government, and the burden of scrutiny falls on the opposition. Committee review, question hour and debates are the main instruments, but their use has varied across sessions and governments (Kapur, Mehta & Vaishnav, 2017).

Legislative accountability is strongest when the opposition is robust, the presiding officers are impartial, and ruling parties accept committee scrutiny. It weakens when bills pass with limited debate or when disruptions replace deliberation.

5.3 Internal Party Democracy

Internal party democracy means open candidate selection, regular organisational elections and participation by members in decisions. In most Indian parties, the partners fail to do so. Leaders are often selected informally, candidates are selected by a small group of people and many parties are controlled by families. Chandra (2016) reports that dynastic politics is common in all parties and regions due to less institutionalisation and the replacement of institutions by family names.

The result is that gifted individuals who are not politically connected struggle to get ahead and party chiefs have a weak motivation to seek advice from party members. Enhancing internal democracy will boost the quality of party candidates and the responsiveness of parties.

Parties' financing transparency has long been an issue of concern. Parties are heavily dependent on anonymous funding, and with the rollout of electoral bonds in 2018, this transparency of donors has come down even further, critics argue (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2018). The Law Commission (2015) had called for greater audit powers, payment from the state to recognised



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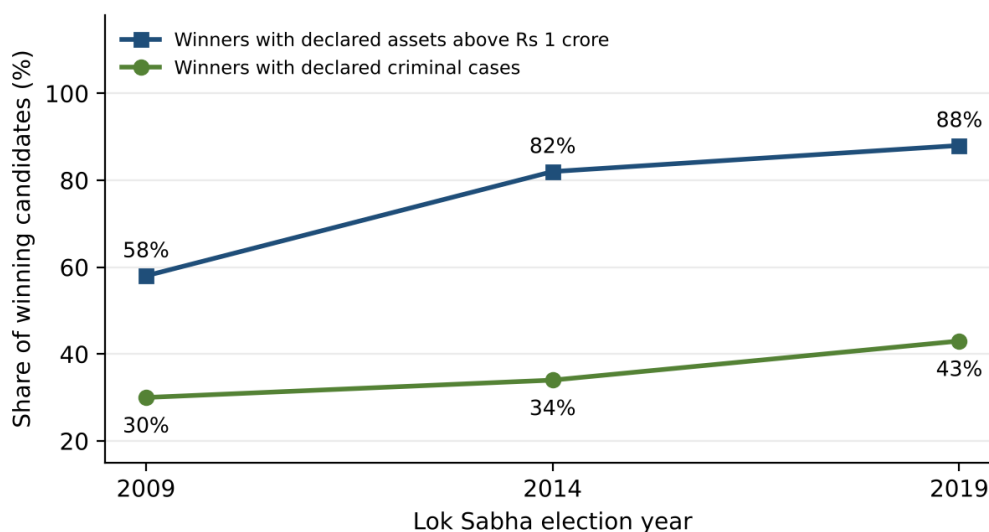
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parties, in some form, and more restrictions on the amount of money that can be donated to them.

Business is also a significant factor. As Jaffrelot, Kohli and Murali (2019) demonstrate, business and politics have been closely intertwined in India's economic growth and the relationship can sometimes become an opportunity for political favouritism. Transparency is essential if voters are to be able to assess which interests are being represented by the parties. Parties have been both leaders and impediments to combating corruption. The results of several major electoral changes – the defeat of governments following allegations of corruption – demonstrate that voters care about corruption. Parties have also backed laws like the Right to Information Act, Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act. However, the expense of electoral processes puts pressure on illegal money, while electoral parties do not wish to be bound by electoral reforms that limit electoral party discretion (Vaishnav, 2017).

As displayed in figure 3, the proportion of candidates with criminal cases has also been increasing as has the proportion of candidates having assets exceeding one crore rupees. The former has increased from 30 to 43 per cent and the latter from 58 to 88 per cent between 2009 and 2019, suggesting that winners are more, not less, likely to be poor and criminals.

Figure 3: Winning Lok Sabha candidates with declared criminal cases and assets above Rs 1 crore (per cent)



Source: Association for Democratic Reforms (2019).

These patterns suggest that parties often view wealth and local influence as measures of electoral viability, and this weakens their role as anti-corruption institutions.

6. Political Parties and the Future of Democratic Governance

Parties should hold regular and verifiable internal elections, publish candidate-selection procedures and provide grievance mechanisms for members. Legal measures could require



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ISSN No: 3049-4176

registered parties to file organisational election records with the Election Commission. Reform of this kind would reduce dynastic closure and increase the supply of capable candidates, though enforcement would need to respect party autonomy (Chandra, 2016).

Parties should disclose all donations above a low threshold, submit audited accounts on time and make the data public in machine-readable form. The Law Commission (2015) and independent analysts have urged tighter limits on cash donations and stronger oversight. Reform of campaign finance would also reduce the pressure on parties to nominate wealthy candidates (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2018).

6.1 Promoting Inclusive Political Representation

Greater inclusion requires parties to nominate more women, minorities and first-generation politicians. Legislative reservation for women, repeatedly proposed, would formalise this commitment, but parties can act without waiting for legislation by adopting internal quotas. Evidence from reserved constituencies suggests that inclusion changes patterns of representation and can improve policy attention to marginalised groups (Jensenius, 2017).

6.2 Enhancing Citizen–Party Engagement

Parties should create regular, open channels for citizens, including local committees, public consultations on manifestos and digital platforms for feedback. Kruks-Wisner (2018) shows that citizens who actively engage with institutions obtain better access to services, and parties that facilitate such engagement can strengthen both representation and state responsiveness. Greater engagement would also reduce dependence on patronage as the main link between voters and parties (Bussell, 2019).

Institutional reform should aim to protect the independence of the Election Commission, strengthen the enforcement of model codes, improve scrutiny of candidate affidavits and consider limits on how long candidates with serious pending charges may contest. Debates on proportional elements in the electoral system and on simultaneous elections should be informed by evidence on their effects on representation and federalism (Law Commission, 2015). Reforms are most likely to succeed when major parties see them as shared rules of the game rather than partisan moves.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Major Findings

The analysis yields five main findings. First, parties have widened representation, drawing previously excluded groups into politics, although gender inclusion remains limited. Second, parties have raised participation: turnout rose to 67.4 per cent in 2019. Third, parties have enabled government formation under both coalition and single-party conditions, giving the system resilience. Fourth, accountability mechanisms are uneven, as legislative scrutiny and internal party democracy are weak. Fifth, money and criminality have become more visible among winning candidates. Table 4 summarises the main gaps and possible responses.



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Table 4: Major institutional gaps and suggested reforms

Area	Observed gap	Suggested reform
Internal party democracy	Informal leadership selection; dynastic control	Mandatory, audited organisational elections; transparent candidate selection
Party finance	Anonymous donations; limited disclosure	Full donor disclosure; timely audited accounts; limits on cash
Representation of women	Women hold about 14 per cent of Lok Sabha seats	Internal party quotas; legislative reservation
Criminalisation	43 per cent of 2019 winners declared criminal cases	Faster trials; stricter vetting of candidates by parties
Legislative scrutiny	Limited committee review; party whips	Mandatory committee referral for major bills

Source: Compiled by the author from Association for Democratic Reforms (2019), Law Commission (2015) and Kapur & Vaishnav (2018).

7.2 Contribution of Political Parties to Democratic Governance

Parties contribute to democratic governance by connecting citizens to institutions. They provide choices at elections, structure legislative work, form governments and organise opposition. They have also been agents of social change, particularly through the political rise of backward and Dalit communities. The record shows that parties are indispensable for democracy, and that their contribution has been greatest when competition is real, voters are informed and institutions are independent (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Ziegfeld, 2016).

7.3 Key Challenges and Institutional Gaps

Challenges can be grouped under four headings. Organisational challenges include personalised leadership and dynastic succession. Financial challenges include opaque funding and high election costs. Ethical challenges include the presence of candidates with criminal records and the use of identity appeals that divide communities. Institutional challenges include weak legislative scrutiny and pressure on independent bodies. Vaishnav and Hinton (2019) argue that India faces a crisis of representation in which the structure of party competition does not always reflect citizens' priorities, a claim consistent with the evidence discussed above.

7.4 Implications for Indian Democracy

The findings have three implications. First, democratic strengthening requires reform of parties themselves, not only of electoral rules or courts. Second, transparency and inclusion are mutually reinforcing: open finance and open candidate selection reduce the advantage of wealth and connections. Third, the health of democracy depends on a competitive and credible opposition as much as on a capable government. If parties adopt these reforms, India's



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ISSN No: 3049-4176

democracy can combine its strong electoral base with better governance outcomes (Jaffrelot, 2021).

8. Conclusion

These are the main institutions of Indian democracy, the political parties. They have expanded participation, represented diverse communities, created governments and acted as opposition, leading democracy to survive in tough circumstances. Meanwhile their limited accountability in governance resulted from weak internal democracy, opaque finance, increasing importance of money, and criminal records, while at the same time are hampered by limited parliamentary oversight. In order to strengthen democratic governance in the Indian context it is imperative that its supporting parties are strengthened as well.

Five recommendations are made in the paper. First, ensure that registered parties have run audited intra-party elections and published candidate-selection processes. Second, require complete disclosure of party fundraising and prompt reporting of audited financial statements. Third, implement party quotas and legislative reservation to increase the number of women in parliament. Fourth, improve the screening and expedite the trial of legislators with serious charges. Fifth, ensure the autonomy of Election Commission and enhance the accountability of the committees in Parliament. These measures would combine to enhance transparency, inclusion and accountability.

Future research might involve primary research on party members and voters, comparative research on parties at state levels, and study the impact of digital campaigning on participation. It would also be beneficial to have quantitative analysis of the relationship between party finance and party outcomes. The adoption of reforms could be followed up in longitudinal studies to determine whether specific reforms in party rules produce better governance outcomes.

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