WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal Homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Democracy Under Scrutiny: "Vote Chori" Allegations and the Erosion of Electoral Trust in India

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ABSTRACT

Electoral integrity is fundamental to the survival and legitimacy of democratic governance. In India, the world's largest democracy, free and fair elections serve as the primary mechanism through which citizens exercise their political rights and hold governments accountable. However, the emergence of "Vote Chori" (vote theft) allegations during 2025 generated considerable political debate concerning electoral transparency, voter-list management, institutional accountability, and public confidence in democratic institutions. This paper critically examines the political, legal, and institutional dimensions of these allegations and their implications for electoral trust in India. It reviews the constitutional framework governing elections, the role of the Election Commission of India, judicial interventions, and the influence of traditional and social media in shaping electoral perceptions. The study adopts a doctrinal, descriptive, and analytical research methodology based primarily on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, statutory legislation, judicial decisions, election-related reports, academic literature, and media publications. It argues that electoral credibility depends not only on the actual fairness of elections but also on institutional transparency, public accountability, and citizens' confidence in electoral procedures. The paper recommends strengthening electoral transparency, improving voter awareness, addressing misinformation, and enhancing institutional independence to safeguard democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Electoral Integrity; Vote Chori; Public Trust; Indian Democracy; Election Commission of India; Electoral Reforms; Political Polarisation; Misinformation; Democratic Legitimacy; Free and Fair Elections.

Introduction

Democracy is founded on the principles of popular sovereignty, political equality, accountability, and public participation. Elections provide citizens with an opportunity to choose their representatives and influence the direction of government. In a democratic country, the legitimacy of political authority depends substantially on the credibility of the electoral process. Therefore, free, fair, and transparent elections are essential for protecting constitutional democracy and maintaining public confidence in governmental institutions. India adopted parliamentary democracy after independence and established universal adult suffrage as a fundamental feature of its constitutional framework. The Constitution of India provides an institutional and legal structure for conducting elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President. Article 324 empowers the Election Commission of India (ECI) with the superintendence, direction, and control of elections. The Representation of the People Acts of 1950 and 1951 further regulate electoral registration, qualifications, election procedures, and dispute resolution.

Over the years, the Indian electoral system has undergone significant transformations through electoral reforms, technological developments, and judicial interventions. The introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs), electoral photo identity cards, and digital voter registration mechanisms represents important efforts to improve electoral administration. Nevertheless, concerns relating to electoral expenditure, criminalisation of politics, voter-list irregularities, political influence, and the credibility of election management continue to attract public attention.

The controversy surrounding "Vote Chori" allegations in 2025 brought electoral integrity into renewed national political debate. Political allegations concerning voter-list discrepancies, possible irregularities in electoral administration, and questions about the transparency of electoral procedures generated competing interpretations among political parties, media organisations, and citizens. These allegations must be examined critically by distinguishing documented facts, official responses, political claims, and matters that remain disputed. An allegation of electoral irregularity cannot automatically be treated as proof of electoral fraud. The importance of this controversy extends beyond political competition. It raises fundamental questions about the accountability of constitutional institutions, citizens' right to political participation, transparency in electoral administration, and the acceptance of election results. Even when allegations remain unproven, the absence of timely and convincing institutional explanations can contribute to public suspicion.

Social media has further complicated this situation by enabling political claims, videos, opinions, and unverified information to circulate rapidly. Consequently, electoral controversies increasingly influence public perceptions through digital communication, political campaigns, and media narratives.

Against this background, the present paper examines the relationship between electoral integrity and public trust in India, with particular reference to the 2025 “Vote Chori” controversy. It evaluates the constitutional and institutional framework, political narratives, misinformation, judicial oversight, and possible electoral reforms necessary to strengthen democratic confidence.

Honesty in Voting

Honesty in Voting refers to the adherence of electoral processes to democratic principles, including fairness, transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and political equality. It covers all stages of elections, beginning with voter registration and continuing through campaigning, polling, counting, and the declaration of results.

The essential components of electoral integrity include:

- Universal adult suffrage and equal voting rights.
- Accurate and accessible electoral rolls.
- Impartial election administration.
- Secrecy and security of voting.
- Transparent vote counting and verification.
- Effective grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Accountability of political parties and candidates.

International standards recognise free and fair elections as an essential element of democratic governance. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right to participate in government and provides that the will of the people shall be expressed through genuine periodic elections. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects citizens' rights to participate in public affairs and vote in genuine elections. These principles provide an important basis for evaluating the credibility of electoral administration in India.

Political legitimacy

Political Legitimacy refers to citizens' confidence in democratic institutions, electoral procedures, political representatives, and constitutional safeguards. It reflects the belief that public institutions operate according to law and serve the interests of citizens without political discrimination. Several factors influence public trust, including the independence of electoral authorities, transparency of administrative decisions, accountability of elected representatives, and timely resolution of electoral grievances. The Election Commission, judiciary, legislature, and media play important roles in maintaining democratic confidence. When these institutions demonstrate impartiality and openness, citizens are more likely to accept electoral outcomes. Conversely, persistent allegations of irregularities without satisfactory clarification can create institutional distrust.

False Information and Electoral Politics

False Information and Electoral Politics refers to false or misleading information circulated without adequate verification. Disinformation generally refers to misleading information deliberately created or disseminated to deceive or manipulate audiences. Social media platforms have transformed the circulation of political information. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X enable political messages to reach large audiences within a short period. However, unverified videos, misleading photographs, fabricated documents, and manipulated political statements can distort public understanding. In electoral controversies, misinformation may influence perceptions regarding voter registration, EVMs, vote counting, and election administration. Therefore, media literacy, independent fact-checking, and responsible digital communication are essential for protecting electoral credibility.

Role of the Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India is a constitutional authority established under Article 324. It is responsible for the superintendence, direction, and control of elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President.

Its major responsibilities include:

1. Preparation and revision of electoral rolls.
2. Announcement and administration of election schedules.
3. Recognition of political parties and allocation of election symbols.
4. Implementation of the Model Code of Conduct.
5. Monitoring election expenditure.

6. Supervision of polling and counting arrangements.
7. Addressing complaints concerning electoral procedures.

The Commission has introduced various technological and administrative measures to improve electoral management. EVMs, VVPATs, online voter registration, and electoral information systems are important examples. However, constitutional independence must be accompanied by transparency and accountability. The Commission should ensure that electoral decisions are adequately explained and that legitimate complaints receive timely attention.

Constitutional Provisions: Articles 324–329

The Constitution of India provides a comprehensive framework for electoral administration.

Article	**Constitutional provision**
Article 324	Superintendence, direction and control of elections vested in the Election Commission
Article 325	One general electoral roll and prohibition of exclusion on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex
Article 326	Elections based on adult suffrage
Article 327	Power of Parliament to make laws relating to elections
Article 328	Power of State Legislatures to make laws concerning elections, subject to parliamentary legislation
Article 329	Bar to judicial interference in electoral matters, subject to constitutional and statutory procedures

Article 326 is particularly important because it guarantees the principle of adult suffrage, subject to constitutional and statutory qualifications. Article 325 protects the principle of non-discriminatory electoral registration. Article 329(b) provides that elections to Parliament and State Legislatures may generally be questioned only through an election petition presented in accordance with law. These provisions collectively protect electoral democracy and ensure institutional continuity.

Representation of the People Acts

The Representation of the People Act, 1950, primarily deals with the allocation of seats, delimitation-related matters, voter qualifications, and preparation of electoral rolls. The Representation of the People Act, 1951, regulates the conduct of elections, qualifications and disqualifications of candidates, corrupt electoral practices, election offences, and election petitions. Section 100 of the 1951 Act provides grounds on which an election may be declared void. Section 123 identifies corrupt practices, while Section 80 provides for election petitions. Together, these laws provide legal mechanisms to address electoral irregularities and protect the democratic rights of citizens.

Judicial Intervention

The judiciary has played a significant role in strengthening electoral transparency and accountability.

Important judicial decisions include:

- Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms (2002): The Supreme Court recognised voters' right to receive relevant information about electoral candidates.
- People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India (2003): The Court affirmed the importance of disclosure of information concerning candidates.
- People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India (2013): The Supreme Court recognised the NOTA option in electronic voting.
- Subramanian Swamy v. Election Commission of India (2013): The Court recognised the importance of paper trail verification in ensuring confidence in EVM-based elections.
- Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India (2024): The Supreme Court invalidated the electoral bonds scheme, emphasising the constitutional importance of transparency in political funding.

Judicial intervention ensures that electoral authorities and political institutions remain subject to constitutional principles.

“Vote Chori” Allegations in India (2025)

The 2025 “Vote Chori” controversy represents an important case for understanding the relationship between political competition, electoral administration, and public confidence in democratic institutions. The controversy became particularly prominent following allegations made by opposition leader Rahul Gandhi concerning electoral rolls and the functioning of election administration.

Background of the Allegations

On 7 August 2025, Rahul Gandhi presented allegations concerning the electoral rolls of the Mahadevapura Assembly segment in the Bengaluru Central Lok Sabha constituency. He alleged that the Congress party's examination of electoral records had identified approximately one lakh questionable entries in the constituency's electoral roll.

The allegations included:

- Voters allegedly registered at invalid or questionable addresses.
- Multiple voters registered at the same residential address.
- Photographs and personal details allegedly containing irregularities.
- Suspected duplication of voter registrations.
- Possible manipulation through the addition or deletion of electoral entries.

According to the reports, the Congress party claimed that its examination of approximately 6.5 lakh electoral entries had identified several categories of questionable registrations. These claims generated considerable political debate concerning the accuracy of electoral rolls and the effectiveness of voter verification mechanisms. It is important to distinguish between questionable entries, confirmed duplicate registrations, and actual instances of fraudulent voting. These categories are not legally or factually identical.

Political Party Claims and Counterclaims

The opposition argued that electoral transparency was necessary to protect democratic rights and demanded greater access to electoral data. It questioned the manner in which voter registrations were maintained and called upon the Election Commission to provide explanations regarding the alleged discrepancies. The Election Commission rejected the allegations and asked Rahul Gandhi to provide a signed declaration or affidavit identifying the voters allegedly included or excluded improperly. It also maintained that electoral rolls were prepared through established legal procedures.

The Commission emphasised that allegations concerning individual voters should be supported by specific evidence rather than general political statements. This disagreement illustrates the importance of institutional accountability and evidence-based political debate. While political parties have a legitimate right to question electoral administration, constitutional institutions must respond through transparent procedures and verifiable information.

Maharashtra Electoral Roll Controversy

Another important dimension of the controversy concerned the 2024 Maharashtra Assembly elections. In February 2025, Rahul Gandhi questioned the addition of approximately 39 lakh new voters to the electoral rolls before the Assembly elections. He raised concerns regarding the transparency of electoral data and sought explanations from the Election Commission. The Commission rejected allegations of electoral irregularities and indicated that it would respond to the concerns. The claims concerning the number of newly registered voters were reported by Reuters, which also stated that it could not independently verify the figure. Therefore, the reported number should be understood as a political claim rather than an independently established finding of electoral fraud.

Bihar Special Intensive Revision (SIR), 2025

The Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in Bihar became another major issue in the national debate concerning electoral integrity. On 24 June 2025, the Election Commission announced an intensive revision exercise to verify electoral rolls and ensure that eligible citizens were included while ineligible entries were removed. The exercise was conducted under Article 324 of the Constitution and Section 21 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950. According to the Election Commission's announcement dated 30 September 2025, the final electoral roll contained approximately 7.42 crore electors. The Commission reported that 65 lakh entries had been removed from the earlier electoral roll, while 21.53 lakh eligible electors had been added to the draft list during the revision process. The revision generated debate concerning voter inclusion, documentation requirements, migration, and the possibility of excluding eligible citizens. The controversy highlighted the need to balance accurate voter registration with the constitutional right to participate in elections.

Media Coverage and Public Discourse

Traditional and digital media played an important role in shaping public understanding of the controversy. Newspapers, television channels, online news portals, and political commentators extensively discussed the allegations and the Election Commission's responses. Different media organisations presented competing interpretations. Some highlighted the opposition's demand for transparency, while others focused on the Commission's defence of

electoral procedures. This situation demonstrates that media coverage does not merely communicate political developments; it also influences the manner in which citizens understand institutional credibility and democratic accountability.

Role of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X became important channels for circulating information and political opinions concerning the allegations. Political speeches, short videos, screenshots of voter lists, and commentary were widely circulated. Although these platforms improved public access to political information, they also created opportunities for the circulation of unverified claims. The research by Roy, Laskar, and Reyaz (2025) demonstrates how multilingual communication, algorithmic content distribution, and political polarisation complicate the verification of election-related information in India.

Analytical Assessment of the Case Study

The 2025 controversy demonstrates three important dimensions of electoral democracy.

- The accuracy of electoral rolls is fundamental to protecting the voting rights of eligible citizens.
- The Election Commission must maintain institutional credibility through accessible information, impartial investigation, and transparent explanations.
- Political parties and media organisations have a responsibility to distinguish between allegations, evidence, and established findings.
- The controversy does not by itself establish that electoral fraud occurred. However, it demonstrates that unresolved questions concerning electoral procedures can become significant challenges to democratic confidence.

Challenges to Electoral Integrity and Public Trust

The 2025 controversy highlights several challenges that require attention from electoral authorities, political parties, and democratic institutions.

Lack of Transparency in Electoral Processes: Transparency is essential for ensuring the credibility of elections. Concerns about electoral rolls, voting technology, counting procedures, and the availability of electoral information can generate public suspicion. Although the Election Commission has introduced several mechanisms to improve transparency, citizens and political parties must have access to adequate information to understand and verify electoral procedures. Delays in responding to complaints or insufficient explanations concerning disputed electoral matters may further weaken institutional confidence.

Spread of Fake News and Misinformation : The spread of fake news is one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary electoral democracy. Unverified information about voter registration, EVMs, election results, and political candidates can influence public opinion. Digital platforms facilitate the rapid circulation of misleading photographs, manipulated videos, and fabricated political statements. In many instances, misinformation spreads faster than fact-checking organisations can verify it. Such developments can create confusion among voters and undermine the credibility of electoral institutions.

Political Polarisation : Political polarisation creates divisions among citizens based on party affiliation, ideology, caste, religion, and regional interests. During electoral controversies, political parties may interpret the same information differently according to their political interests. Supporters may accept claims made by their preferred political leaders while rejecting explanations offered by opposing institutions or parties. This situation reduces the possibility of objective public debate and makes the acceptance of electoral outcomes more difficult.

Weaknesses in Digital Regulation : The growing influence of digital platforms has created new regulatory challenges. Existing electoral laws were primarily developed to regulate traditional political campaigns and conventional election-related activities. The emergence of artificial intelligence, deepfakes, automated political messaging, and algorithm-driven information distribution requires more comprehensive regulatory responses. Digital regulation must also protect freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. Any restrictions must satisfy constitutional requirements and should not become instruments for suppressing legitimate political criticism.

Declining Institutional Confidence : Public confidence in democratic institutions depends on their independence, fairness, and accountability. When constitutional authorities face repeated allegations of political bias or administrative irregularities, their credibility may become a subject of public debate. The solution is not simply to dismiss allegations but to establish transparent procedures through which they can be examined and resolved.

Recommendations

Strengthening electoral integrity requires coordinated reforms involving electoral authorities, political parties, the judiciary, media organisations, and citizens.

Strengthening Electoral Transparency

The Election Commission should improve the accessibility of electoral information and ensure timely publication of relevant voter registration and revision data.

Important measures include:

1. Making electoral roll revision procedures more transparent.
2. Providing political parties with timely access to legally disclosable electoral data.
3. Strengthening mechanisms for identifying duplicate and incorrect entries.
4. Publishing clear explanations concerning additions and deletions of voter names.
5. Improving grievance redressal and complaint-monitoring systems.

Independent scrutiny and appropriate verification mechanisms can strengthen public confidence in electoral administration.

Regulating Electoral Misinformation : A comprehensive framework should be developed to address false and misleading election-related information. Social media platforms should strengthen their systems for identifying manipulated political content, providing contextual information, and responding to credible complaints. However, regulation should distinguish deliberate disinformation from legitimate political criticism. Any regulatory action must respect constitutional freedoms and procedural safeguards. Independent fact-checking organisations should also receive institutional support to improve the accuracy of public information.

Enhancing Voter Awareness Programmes : Voter education is essential for strengthening democratic participation. The Election Commission, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and media should organise awareness programmes concerning:

- Electoral registration and voter-list verification.
- Voting procedures and EVM-VVPAT mechanisms.
- The legal rights of voters.
- Procedures for submitting electoral complaints.
- Identification of misinformation and fabricated content.

Special attention should be given to rural communities, first-time voters, senior citizens, and digitally disadvantaged populations.

Responsible Use of Technology: Technology can improve electoral transparency when supported by appropriate legal and technical safeguards.

The following measures may be considered:

- Strengthening EVM and VVPAT verification procedures.
- Conducting independent technical assessments.
- Improving secure digital access to electoral records.
- Using data analytics to identify suspicious voter-registration patterns.
- Exploring blockchain-based record-management systems for limited administrative applications.

Blockchain should not be presented as an automatically secure or suitable replacement for existing voting systems. Its feasibility, privacy implications, accessibility, and auditability require independent evaluation.

Judicial and Institutional Reforms : The judiciary should continue to protect constitutional electoral rights through effective interpretation of election laws and timely adjudication of disputes.

The following reforms are recommended:

1. Strengthening the institutional independence of the Election Commission.
2. Improving the transparency of the appointment and service conditions of election commissioners within the constitutional framework.
3. Ensuring timely investigation of complaints relating to electoral irregularities.
4. Strengthening legal provisions concerning digital election offences.
5. Improving the effectiveness of election petition procedures.
6. Encouraging regular consultations between electoral authorities and recognised political parties.

The Representation of the People Acts should be periodically reviewed to address emerging technological and administrative challenges.

Promoting Responsible Political Communication : Political parties and elected representatives should exercise responsibility while making allegations concerning electoral processes. Claims of electoral malpractice should be supported by verifiable evidence and presented through appropriate institutional and legal mechanisms. Similarly, electoral authorities should avoid unnecessarily confrontational communication and prioritise factual explanations, public consultation, and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

Democracy depends not only on the conduct of elections but also on the confidence citizens place in the institutions responsible for administering them. The 2025 “Vote Chori” controversy has highlighted important questions concerning electoral transparency, institutional accountability, political competition, and public trust in India. The analysis demonstrates that allegations of electoral irregularities must be examined through objective evidence, established legal procedures, and impartial institutional investigations. Political allegations cannot automatically be treated as proof of electoral fraud. Equally, the absence of a judicial finding of fraud should not prevent legitimate questions about electoral administration from receiving transparent and reasoned responses.

The Election Commission of India occupies a central position in protecting electoral democracy. Its constitutional responsibilities require impartiality, accountability, and public confidence. Strengthening electoral transparency, improving voter-list management, and ensuring effective grievance redressal are necessary to maintain institutional credibility. The increasing influence of social media and digital communication has added another dimension to electoral governance. Misinformation, manipulated political content, and polarised narratives can create doubts concerning electoral outcomes even when allegations have not been established. Therefore, digital literacy, independent fact-checking, and responsible political communication must become important components of democratic reform.

The judiciary also has an essential role in protecting electoral rights and ensuring that election-related disputes are addressed according to constitutional principles. At the same time, political parties, media organisations, and citizens must contribute to a democratic culture based on evidence, accountability, and mutual respect. Ultimately, the strength of Indian democracy lies in the ability of its institutions to maintain public confidence while protecting the political rights of every citizen. The “Vote Chori” controversy should therefore be viewed as an opportunity to strengthen electoral governance rather than merely as a subject of political confrontation. Ensuring free, fair, transparent, and accountable elections remains essential for preserving constitutional democracy and the legitimacy of representative government in India.

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