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We the People of Bharat: Parliamentarians, Electoral Integrity, and Citizen Engagement in Contemporary Indian Democracy

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Abstract

"We the People of Bharat" is the basic principle underlying India's Constitution, stating that sovereignty lies with the citizens. In this paper, three components of democracy in India will be discussed, namely, the role of members of parliament (MPs) in representation of the citizens, elections' fairness (electoral integrity), and citizen engagement. Particular emphasis is made on opposition allegations of "vote theft" — manipulation and rigging of the voting process, false voter enrollment, and manipulation of voter lists. The study employs a mixed method design that consists of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews of the voters who experienced the problems like deletion or false registration of their names (Norris, 2014; Dahl, 1998). The data is collected from reports on the election process, survey research and voters' interviews. In addition to the new findings on perception of elections by citizens, this paper offers policy recommendations formulated in the form of a bill for Parliament on improving the electoral integrity (Election Commission of India, 2022; IDEA, 2023).

Keywords: electoral integrity, citizen engagement, parliamentarians, vote theft, voter list management, democratic accountability, Indian democracy, public trust, legislative reform, Mass Politicization

Introduction

The phrase "We the People of Bharat" embodies the core ideal of democracy in India—the ultimate source of power being the people who elect leaders, demand a fair election and have the rights to take part (India, 2023). Over the past years, opposition leaders expressed their dissatisfaction about "vote theft"—a manipulation in voter lists through cheating, including fake names, elimination of the actual voters and rigged results. While the full truth behind those claims remains unknown, they significantly undermined the faith of citizens (Birch, 2018; Kumar, 2020).

The research focuses on three interrelated aspects of the issue: the role of MPs in improving elections, electoral integrity (the fairness and transparency of the election system) and citizen engagement (level of citizens' interest and involvement into democracy). All three aspects mentioned above are interdependent—fraudulent elections damage the level of citizens' trust which, in its turn, decreases citizen engagement, thus weakening democracy and negatively affecting the common citizen. The main purpose of the work is not only the analysis of the problems in the chosen area but also development of possible solutions to be implemented in India's Parliament.

Conceptual Framework

1 The Foundation: Popular Sovereignty

In a democracy, all powers belong to the people – this is known as "popular sovereignty." In the Constitution of India, the doctrine of popular sovereignty forms the foundation – all the powers of the Government, parliament, and judiciary emanate from the people.

The elections are one of the chief ways through which this is accomplished but it is only effective if it is conducted honestly. Voter list errors, impersonation, or fraudulently manipulating the voting results undermine popular sovereignty.

2 Three Pillars of Indian Democracy

Pillar I – Members of Parliament (MPs): MPs are intermediaries between citizens and the state who make laws, raise citizen concerns and monitor the Election Commission.

However, in most cases, members of parliament also benefit from the electoral system, thus causing conflict between their role as defenders and participants of it (Pitkin, 1967; Mehta, 2003). Pillar II – Electoral Integrity: All stages of the elections must be free of corruption and fraud. The major issues facing India include the misuse of the voters' list, the deletion of names unjustifiably and the creation of fictitious voters (Election Commission of India, 2021; Norris & Grömping, 2019).

Pillar III – Citizens' Participation: Where elections are credible, there is motivation among people to participate. Where there is no credibility, people feel demotivated; hence some don't turn out to vote, others engage in demonstrations while others give up on the process (Putnam, 2000; Almond & Verba, 1963).

3 The Connecting Link: Public Trust

Trust is the thread that runs through all three elements. Trust in the elections increases voter participation and reverence for democracy. Lack of trust leads to the breakdown of the entire system. Trust holds the democracy of India together (Norris, 2015; V-Dem Institute, 2024).

4 Conceptual Model

Table 1: Conceptual Model – How MPs, Elections, and Citizens are Connected (Parkhi, 2025)

MPs' Actions & Speeches	→ Electoral Integrity (Fairness)	→ Citizen Engagement (Participation)
Independent Variable	Core Variable (Mediated by Public Trust)	Dependent Variable (Outcome)

Review of Literature

1 Electoral Integrity and Democracy

Democracy can only be legitimate if all the election procedures are free, fair, and transparent, from voter registration through to complaint procedures (Norris, 2014). Polyarchy theory, according to Dahl, states that for there to be democracy, there must be freedom of competition and inclusiveness; lack of any will result in an incomplete form of democracy (Dahl, 1998). Contemporary scholars have argued that elections should be viewed as fair by everyone.

2 Parliamentarians and Accountability

The categories of representation, as outlined by Pitkin (1967) are formal, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive. If parliamentarians highlight issues surrounding elections, then they enhance accountability, but if parliamentarians play politics around these issues, then they enhance confusion. In mature democracies, parliamentarians are more likely to make elections better, while in competitive democracies, they politicize the electoral issues to gain political advantage (Kapur et al., 2017).

3 Public Trust and Institutional Confidence

As shown by Norris & Grömping (2019), minor issues during an election such as errors on voters' lists can seriously undermine public trust, especially when it comes to larger democracies like India. The Election Commission of India holds constitutional status and is generally trusted, although the issue of managing voter lists, especially in urban and migrant settings, has become controversial (Kumar, 2020; CSDS, 2014-2024).

4 Citizen Engagement and Democratic Health

According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), there is "civic voluntarism model" in which one participates in the process of decision-making when he/she possesses resources, motivation and accessibility. In case the elections are not seen as legitimate, then the motivation disappears. In the analysis of Putnam (2000) on social capital, it becomes clear that democratic participation depends on community ties.

5 The Indian Context

India's electoral process is the largest in the world, with ECI overseeing elections among a voter population of over 900 million people. While ECI's independence is widely acknowledged by scholars, issues such as voter registration inaccuracies, digital divide, and political nature of electoral disputes have been cited as areas of concern (National Election Watch, 2023; Guha, 2017). Findings from the CSDS National Election Studies have always revealed that voters with bureaucratic difficulties such as name deletions and double registrations lack confidence in the process.

6 Gaps in Existing Literature

There are some important gaps, namely very little research is available on the impact that the statements of MPs regarding elections make on public sentiment; little research exists on experiences of the voters with regard to issues related to voter list in India; and majority of the research focuses on institutions as separate entities.

Theoretical Analysis: Existing Theories, Criticism, and New Contributions

1 Analysis of Existing Theories

1 Dahl's Polyarchy Theory (1998)

Central Concept: Democratic systems must have free competition between political organizations and large citizen participation—"polyarchy," or government by the many (Dahl, 1998).

Criticisms: Dahl describes what a democracy must be but fails to describe what occurs when the process of the election itself becomes manipulated. He assumed that, as long as there were elections in place, they had integrity, and he failed to consider "process-level manipulation," or manipulation from inside the process. Perception also played no role in Dahl's definition of democracy.

2 Norris's Electoral Integrity Framework (2014)

Main Concept: A framework to assess electoral integrity throughout the whole process—before the elections, on voting day, and after the elections (Norris, 2014).

Critique: Very good but is only concerned with measurement. It assesses the quality of an election but fails to answer how the citizens react to certain issues and why. It assumes that the citizen is a mere recipient of information and not an active agent who exchanges views and protests.

3 Pitkin's Theory of Representation (1967)

Central Concept: Four different types of representation—formal, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive (Pitkin, 1967).

Flaw: Does not discuss what transpires if the representatives are themselves part of the problem. For example, in India, there are many MPs who gain from the electoral system that they regulate themselves—a dilemma that Pitkin does not account for.

4 Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's Civic Voluntarism Model (1995)

Core Concept: Participation occurs when there is availability of resources, motivation, and opportunity (Verba et al., 1995).

Criticisms: Not comprehensive in the Indian context. Many Indian citizens have resources and opportunity but fail to participate due to lack of trust. The theory does not take into consideration the emotional aspects such as frustration, betrayal, anger that occur due to deletion of one's name and false listings.

4.1.5 Social Capital Theory of Putnam (2000)

Core Concept: Democracy functions well when the members have close ties within their communities—the social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Criticisms: Theory formulated mainly for the American society. While the concept of social capital applies to India in terms of caste network, religious groups, family, etc., these may result in voting rather than democratic participation. The author did not consider "negative social capital."

2 New Theoretical Contributions by This Study

1 Theory of Electoral Trust Erosion (Parkhi, 2025)

When citizens witness such difficulties in elections, whether their names get removed from the voter list, the creation of false lists, or negligence from officials, distrust is created through a cascade effect. Distrust is created by one instance, but through multiple instances, institutional distrust is created. By leaders validating such suspicions through words like "vote stealing," the erosion process is exacerbated.

2 Dual-Role Accountability Paradox Theory (Parkhi, 2025)

The Indian MP is both a protector of the integrity of the election process and one of the beneficiaries of the election process itself. As a legislator, he or she has the ability to improve the election process; as a political opponent, he or she relies on the same process.

3 Democratic Dignity Framework (Parkhi, 2025)

But apart from resources, motivation, and access (Verba et al.), democracy also requires dignity – the sense that your vote counts and that your citizenship is respected by the process. If your name has been removed incorrectly, or if fake voters have been added to the registration list at your address, the effect will be psychological and ethical, not merely logistical.

4 Mass Politicization of Electoral Integrity Theory (Parkhi, 2025)

Electoral integrity has been a matter of interest among elites only until now. However, in present-day India, electoral integrity has emerged as a mass politics issue being discussed among common people in homes, rural areas, social media platforms, and other forums of public debate. Statements by political elites, media reporting, and experience of voters have collectively made electoral integrity a democratic crisis.

5 Constitutional Promise-Performance Gap Theory (Parkhi, 2025)

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality, justice, and democracy, but poor performance of institutions is evident. Poor performance leads to frustration and disillusionment among citizens. The larger the gap, the more fragile democracy will be, as citizens view the constitution as an ideal rather than practice.

3 Summary: Existing Theories vs. New Contributions

Table 2: Comparison of Existing Theories and New Contributions (Parkhi, 2025)

Theory/Framework	Source	Key Limitation	New Contribution by Parkhi (2025)
Polyarchy	Dahl (1998)	Ignores process-level manipulation	Electoral Trust Erosion Theory
Electoral Integrity Framework	Norris (2014)	Treats citizens as passive	Mass Politicization of Electoral Integrity
Representation Theory	Pitkin (1967)	Ignores dual-role conflict	Dual-Role Accountability Paradox
Civic Voluntarism	Verba et al. (1995)	Misses' dignity dimension	Democratic Dignity Framework
Social Capital	Putnam (2000)	Ignores negative social capital	Promise-Performance Gap Theory

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1 Research Questions

RQ1: What is the role of the MP in creating public perception on the fairness of Indian elections?

RQ2: How do voter list issues and "vote theft" allegations impact trust in the Election Commission?

RQ3: Is there any relationship between election fairness and democratic engagement?

RQ4: How does the experience of actual election issues (deletion of names, false voters) impact voter confidence?

RQ5: Are there any possible solutions through legislative measures and reforms to build trust and participation in elections?

2 Hypotheses

H1: MPs' behavior influences public perceptions about the integrity of elections.

H2: Elections' inconsistencies lower the level of institutional trust.

H3: More electoral integrity results in increased participation among citizens.

H4: Citizens who encounter difficulties in their electoral process have less trust than those who don't have them.

H5: Increased transparency and efficient complaints handling boost public trust.

H6: More accountability for MP behavior improves democratic legitimacy.

3 Variables and Indicators

Table 3: Variables and Indicators Used in This Study (Parkhi, 2025)

Type	Variable	Meaning	Measurement
Independent	Role of MPs	What MPs say and do about elections	Parliamentary debates, speeches, reform efforts
Core Variable	Electoral Integrity	Election fairness and transparency	Voter list accuracy, polling fairness, complaint handling
Mediating	Public Trust	Confidence in election institutions	Trust in ECI, acceptance of results, belief in fairness
Dependent	Citizen Engagement	Democratic participation levels	Voter turnout, political awareness, civic involvement
Control	Demographics	Background factors affecting results	Age, education, income, location, gender

Research Methodology

1 Research Design

This study utilizes a mixed method design, which employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative designs for measurement and personal experience of the problem respectively.

2 Nature of the Study

The study is descriptive (public opinion), analytical (establishes relationships between variables) and explanatory (explains how trust increases and decreases with experience in elections).

3 Sources of Data

Primary Data: Voter surveys using structured questionnaires; semi-structured interviews with those who have had experiences of voter lists; key informant interviews with election monitors/observers and experts.

Secondary Data: Reports from the Election Commission of India (2021, 2022); academic articles/journals; media articles (The Hindu, 2023-2024); Democracy Indices from IDEA (2023) and V-Dem (2024)

4 Sampling

Purposive and Stratified Sampling of selected constituencies in Maharashtra state. Respondents will be registered voters, both urban and rural from diverse age groups and socio-economic status.

5 Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative: Statistical description and correlation analysis to validate the six hypotheses.

Qualitative: Content analysis of the interview data for identifying patterns.

6 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent from all the participants has been obtained. Personal identity information remains anonymous. The data is employed solely for scholarly purposes.

7 Limitations

Self-reporting of the experience is one limitation of the study. Findings are context-based and cannot necessarily be generalized to other areas in India. There was no access to institutional data.

Data Analysis and Findings

1 Perceptions of Electoral Integrity

Table 4: Perception of Electoral Integrity among Respondents (Parkhi, 2025)

Integrity Level	% of Respondents
High	32%
Moderate	42%
Low	26%

Finding 1: 68% of voters rated electoral integrity as moderate or low, indicating widespread concern about election fairness (Norris & Grömping, 2019).

2 Role of Parliamentarians

MPs were perceived as vital in addressing the issues of elections but were viewed more as people motivated politically than those interested in improving the situation. The speeches made by the MPs heightened voter awareness but failed in addressing the administrative issues.

Finding 2: The involvement of the MPs in addressing the electoral issues leads to voter awareness but does not have much effect on reforming (Pitkin, 1967; Kapur et al., 2017).

3 Public Trust in Electoral Institutions

Trust depended on individual experience. Voters who had positive experiences trusted the system more than those whose experience involved names being deleted or fake names inserted.

Finding 3: There is a strong negative correlation between individual experience of electoral problems and trust in electoral institutions (CSDS, 2014-2024).

4 Types of Electoral Issues Reported by Voters

Table 5: Types of Electoral Issues Experienced by Voters (Parkhi, 2025)

Type of Issue	% of Affected Respondents
Voter List Duplication	30%
Name Deletion	25%
Fake Voting	15%
No Issues Faced	30%

Finding 4: 70% of respondents experienced at least one electoral issue. Voter list duplication was most common (30%), followed by name deletion (25%).

5 Citizen Engagement

Despite worries about low turnout, most people participated, indicating their dedication to democracy. Yet, for individuals who repeatedly had negative experiences, participation in other political activities such as rallies and meetings decreased.

Finding 5: Positive relationship between perceptions of electoral integrity and citizen participation. Negative experiences discourage wider participation regardless of continued voter turnout (Verba et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000).

6 Qualitative Findings from Voter Interviews

The voters felt "invisible" by the deletion of their names, claiming it to be an insult to their citizenship. They felt that neither the Election Commission nor their Member of Parliament cared about their issue.

Finding 6: Ineffective electoral administration causes emotional distress and "democratic indignity," which results in decreased future participation (Parkhi, 2025 - Democratic Dignity Framework).

7 Correlation Data: Electoral Integrity vs. Public Trust

Table 6: Correlation between Electoral Integrity and Public Trust Scores (Parkhi, 2025)

Electoral Integrity Score	Public Trust Score
1	1.5
2	2.1
2.5	2.8
3	3
3.5	3.5
4	3.8
4.5	4.3

Clear positive correlation: as electoral integrity scores increase, public trust also increases. This confirms H3 and H5.

8 Citizen Engagement Across Electoral Experience Levels

Table 7: Citizen Engagement across Electoral Experience Levels (Parkhi, 2025)

Electoral Experience	Engagement Level (Mean)
Very Poor	2.0
Poor	2.5
Average	3.2
Good	3.9
Very Good	4.5

9 Hypothesis Testing Summary

Table 8: Hypothesis Testing Summary (Parkhi, 2025)

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	MPs' conduct influences perceptions of electoral integrity	Supported
H2	Electoral irregularities reduce institutional trust	Supported
H3	Higher electoral integrity leads to higher citizen engagement	Supported
H4	Administrative issues lower voter confidence	Supported
H5	Transparency improves public trust in elections	Partially Supported

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H6	Parliamentary accountability enhances democratic legitimacy	Partially Supported

Discussion

These findings provide evidence that fair elections are the base of democratic legitimacy. This paper contributes to a clearer understanding of how low-level challenges such as voter lists errors, fake names, or deleting names lead to a chain of events which weakens the whole democratic system (Norris, 2014; Dahl, 1998).

The function of MPs became more complicated as MPs draw attention to electoral issues by talking about them and increase confusion and distrust if they use them politically. This supports the theory of the Dual-Role Accountability Paradox when MPs are both healers and patients of the electoral system (Parkhi, 2025).

The most influential finding is connected to voters' feelings when they have their names removed from the lists. People experience their citizenship taken away. This is consistent with the Democratic Dignity Framework and goes beyond the resource approach of Verba et al. (1995).

This theory helps explain how these problems have become so volatile. What began as a technical problem has transformed into a mass-level problem, with the comments of political leaders fueling this process (Parkhi, 2025).

In spite of all of its difficulties, Indians continue to cast their ballots—a sign of deep democracy. But this durability has limits. In the absence of reforms, the Promise-Performance gap in India's constitution will simply be too large to close (Parkhi, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2024).

Policy Recommendations and Proposed Legislative Bill Framework

1 Proposed Bill: The Electoral Integrity and Citizen Trust Act, 2025

(A framework for strengthening electoral processes, ensuring voter dignity, and enhancing democratic participation in India)

Preamble: WHEREAS sovereign power is vested in the citizens of India as declared in the Constitution of India by way of "We the People"; AND WHEREAS election integrity forms the bedrock of such sovereignty; AND WHEREAS there is enough evidence to show that there exist certain problems with voter lists, responsiveness, and trust of the people; NOW THEREFORE, it is enacted.

Part I: Voter List Integrity

Section 1: Mandatory audit of all electoral rolls by third parties every two years, results of which must be made public within 90 days.

Section 2: All deletions and additions in the voter list must be justified, and the concerned citizen must be notified in writing of the same at least 30 days in advance.

Section 3: A Digital Voter Verification Portal must be established where citizens can check, update, and monitor their registration details.

Section 4: Heavy penalty of imprisonment for up to 3 years, and/or fine up to Rs. 5 lakh, for fraudulent deletion/creation/duplication of any voter entry.

Part II: Parliamentary Electoral Oversight Committee

Section 5: A Permanent Joint Committee on Electoral Integrity shall be constituted, comprising members from all known political parties.

Section 6: The Committee shall conduct annual reviews of the ECI, evaluate complaints from voters, and give binding recommendations to Parliament.

Section 7: Members of Parliament shall conduct constituency elections integrity assessments after every general election.

Part III: Citizen Electoral Rights and Dignity

Section 8: All citizens should enjoy the right to having a confirmed and protected identity for voting; violation will be a cognizable offense.

Section 9: Grievances against voters at the district level shall be sorted out within 21 days.

Section 10: Voter education should take place in all constituencies relating to registration, complaints, and online confirmation.

Part IV: Electoral Transparency and Technology

Section 11: All changes to voter lists should happen with due notice to the public and with verification from the community, especially in the case of urban wards and migrants.

Section 12: Transparency Reports on Changes in Voter Rolls should be published every quarter by the ECI.

Section 13: Electoral data should be open-source for the purpose of research.

Part V: Accountability and Penalties

Section 14: The election authorities who engage in negligence with regard to the voter's list shall be disciplined by suspending and prosecuting them.

Section 15: Parties or candidates who manipulate the voters' list shall be disqualified for six years.

2 Summary of Policy Recommendations

Table 9: Summary of Policy Recommendations (Parkhi, 2025)

Area	Recommendation	Expected Outcome
Voter Lists	Third-party audits + digital portal	Accurate rolls, reduced fraud
Parliament	Joint Committee on Electoral Integrity	Institutional oversight, MP accountability
Citizens	Voter Grievance Authority + education	Higher trust, greater participation
Technology	Open data + quarterly reports	Transparency, public verification
Penalties	Criminal liability for manipulation	Deterrence, system integrity

Conclusion

This research shows that the most important thing that helps sustain democracy in India is electoral integrity. Free elections make people trust the process, and from there, people participate in the process and hence sustain democracy (Norris, 2014; Putnam, 2000). However, whenever the chain is broken because of things like mistakes in voter list, use of fake name or deletion of the voter, the effects go beyond the elections to undermine the whole democracy. This research has shown that 70% of those interviewed have faced some problem with elections and has seen effects on trust and participation.

MPs have dual roles as they can fix the problem and yet depend on the same problem for their power. This Dual Role Accountability Paradox hinders reform. Electoral Integrity and Citizen Trust Act, 2025 has been proposed to offer structural fixes to the problem.

The five theories introduced include Electoral Trust Erosion, Democratic Dignity Framework, Mass Politicization of Electoral Integrity, Dual-Role Accountability Paradox and Constitutional Promise-Performance Gap. These are new ways of looking at democracy in India (Parkhi, 2025). The democratic promise of India is that "We the People of Bharat"—is not just a phrase but a responsibility belonging to every MP, election official, and citizen.

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Appendix: Data Visualization Summary

The following tables summarize key quantitative findings. In the original publication, these were presented as bar graphs, pie charts, scatter plots, and line graphs.

Appendix A: Perception of Electoral Integrity Data

Integrity Level	Percentage
High	32%
Moderate	42%
Low	26%

Appendix B: Electoral Issues Distribution

Issue Type	Percentage
Voter List Duplication	30%
Name Deletion	25%
Fake Voting	15%
No Issues	30%

Appendix C: Electoral Integrity–Trust Correlation Data

Integrity Score	Trust Score
1	1.5
2	2.1
2.5	2.8
3	3
3.5	3.5
4	3.8
4.5	4.3

Appendix D: Engagement by Electoral Experience

Experience Level	Engagement (Mean)
Very Poor	2.0
Poor	2.5
Average	3.2
Good	3.9
Very Good	4.5