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ELECTORAL POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION IN INDIA: THE ROLE OF IDENTITY, LEADERSHIP, AND POLITICAL MOBILISATION

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Abstract

Elections have been the central mechanism through which Indian democracy has transformed itself since independence. Successive general and state elections have shifted power from a narrow, largely upper-caste elite to backward classes, Dalits, regional communities and, more recently, women voters, while also producing new forms of majoritarian consolidation and personalised leadership. This study examines how three forces, namely identity, leadership and political mobilisation, have shaped electoral politics in India and, through it, the character of Indian democracy. Using a qualitative analytical method based on official electoral statistics, national election surveys, judicial decisions and scholarly literature, the study traces the evolution of the party system from the Congress system to the era of coalitions and the emergence of a new dominant party, and then analyses the role of caste, religion, region, gender and class identities; national and regional leadership; and party organisation, social movements, welfare delivery and digital campaigning. The analysis finds that electoral politics has deepened democracy by widening participation and representation, particularly through the "second democratic upsurge" of subaltern groups and the steady rise in women's turnout. At the same time, the growing weight of religious identity, the concentration of authority in individual leaders, the influence of money and criminality, and unequal access to media and campaign finance pose challenges to the quality of democracy. The 2024 Lok Sabha election, in which no single party won a majority and social-justice issues regained salience, shows that Indian voters continue to reshape the balance of power. The study concludes with measures to strengthen electoral integrity, intra-party democracy and inclusive representation.

Keywords: electoral politics; identity; caste; leadership; political mobilisation; party system; democratic transformation; India

1. Introduction

India has held regular, competitive elections for more than seven decades, with an electorate that has grown from about 173 million in 1951–52 to nearly 970 million in 2024. In a country marked by deep social inequality, widespread poverty and enormous diversity of language, religion and caste, the survival of electoral democracy has itself been a remarkable achievement. Yet elections in India have done more than select governments. They have been the principal arena in which social groups have claimed recognition, contested hierarchies and renegotiated their place in the political order. Electoral politics has therefore been a driver of democratic transformation, changing who participates, who is represented and how power is exercised.

The scale of Indian elections is unmatched. The 2024 general election was held in seven phases over about six weeks, with more than a million polling stations and over 640 million votes cast. Behind these numbers lie distinctive features: the poor and rural voters turn out at rates equal to or higher than the affluent, voting is widely regarded as an expression

of dignity and citizenship, and the outcome is often unpredictable even for the most powerful parties (Banerjee, 2014). These features make India an important case for understanding how elections can transform a deeply unequal society, and also how they can be used to concentrate power.

Three forces have been especially important in this process. The first is identity: caste, religion, region, language, gender and class provide the bases on which voters are mobilised and parties construct coalitions. The second is leadership: Indian politics has repeatedly been shaped by leaders, at national and state level, whose personal appeal could reorganise loyalties and redefine political agendas. The third is political mobilisation: the organisational, programmatic, emotional and technological means through which parties and movements bring voters into politics. These forces interact with one another and with institutions such as the Election Commission, the courts and the media. The transformation they have produced is not one-directional. Electoral politics has empowered previously excluded groups, but it has also produced new exclusions, polarisation along religious lines, the personalisation of power and the rising cost of elections. The 2024 general election, in which the ruling party lost its single-party majority and regional and social-justice parties made significant gains, has reopened questions about the direction of Indian democracy. This study addresses the following objectives:

1. To trace the evolution of electoral politics and the party system in India.
2. To analyse the role of identity in shaping electoral behaviour and party strategies.
3. To examine the influence of leadership and the different forms of political mobilisation on electoral outcomes.
4. To assess the implications of these processes for democratic transformation, and to suggest measures to strengthen democratic quality.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Democratic transformation

Democratic transformation refers to change in the depth and quality of democracy, not merely in its formal existence. It includes the expansion of participation, the inclusion of previously excluded groups in representation and power, the responsiveness of governments to citizens, and the protection of rights and institutions that make competition fair. A democracy can deepen in some of these dimensions while weakening in others; in India, scholars have noted both an expansion of participation and representation and, in recent years, concerns about liberal rights and institutional autonomy (Varshney, 2019).

2.2 Identity and electoral politics

Identity politics refers to the mobilisation of voters on the basis of shared social characteristics. Early studies argued that caste, far from disappearing with modernisation, adapted to democratic politics through caste associations and became a vehicle of political participation (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967; Kothari, 1970). Chandra (2004) argued that in a patronage democracy, voters expect benefits from co-ethnic representatives, so that ethnic parties succeed when the group they represent is large enough to win. Identities are not fixed, however; parties actively construct broader categories, such as “backward classes”, “bahujan” or “Hindu”, to build winning coalitions (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

2.3 Leadership

Weber’s (1978) distinction between traditional, legal-rational and charismatic authority helps to explain the role of leaders in Indian elections. Charismatic leaders can reorganise political loyalties, bypass party organisations and create direct emotional bonds with voters. In India, charismatic and personalised leadership has coexisted with dynastic succession and with patronage networks, so that leaders act both as symbols of collective aspiration and as distributors

of resources (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

2.4 Political mobilisation

Political mobilisation is the process by which citizens are drawn into political activity. Social movement theory emphasises political opportunities, mobilising structures and the framing of grievances (Tarrow, 2011). In electoral politics, mobilisation takes place through party organisations, social movements, clientelist networks, ideological organisations, welfare delivery and, increasingly, digital media. The form of mobilisation shapes the kind of democracy that results: programmatic mobilisation encourages accountability for policy, while clientelist or polarising mobilisation can weaken it (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Wilkinson, 2004).

3. Review of Literature

Research on Indian electoral politics has developed in several overlapping strands. Kothari (1964) described the "Congress system", in which a single dominant party contained factions and absorbed opposition within itself, with opposition parties acting as a margin of pressure. Its decline after 1967 led to studies of party fragmentation, regionalisation and coalition government. Yadav (2000) identified a "second democratic upsurge" from the late 1980s, in which backward castes, Dalits, Adivasis and the poor participated in elections at higher rates than the privileged, reversing the usual pattern in democracies. Jaffrelot (2003) documented the "silent revolution" through which lower castes gained political power in northern India, and Jaffrelot and Kumar (2009) showed the changing social composition of state legislatures.

A second strand examines identity and voting. Chandra (2004) explained the success of ethnic parties through patronage and head counts; Heath, Verniers and Kumar (2015) found that Muslim voters do not necessarily prefer Muslim candidates, showing that party and ideology mediate identity; and Chhibber and Verma (2018) argued that Indian voters hold coherent ideological positions on questions of state intervention and recognition of group identities. Ziegfeld (2016) explained the rise of regional parties through the clientelist structure of Indian politics and the opportunities offered by coalition government.

A third strand addresses the recent transformation of the party system. Studies of the 2014 and 2019 elections described the emergence of a second dominant party system centred on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), built on a broad Hindu coalition including many backward-caste and Dalit voters (Chhibber & Verma, 2019; Palshikar et al., 2017). Sircar (2020) emphasised the politics of trust in a leader, Aiyar (2019) the role of centrally delivered welfare, and Jaffrelot (2021) the rise of Hindu nationalism and what he called ethnic democracy. Vaishnav (2017) examined the role of money and criminality in elections, and Banerjee (2014) explored why Indians vote in large numbers, showing that voting carries meanings of citizenship and dignity beyond material exchange. What the literature has less often done is bring identity, leadership and mobilisation together within one framework of democratic transformation, which is the aim of the present study.

4. Research Methodology

The study uses a qualitative, analytical and descriptive design based on secondary sources. These include the statistical reports of the Election Commission of India; findings of the National Election Studies and post-poll surveys conducted by the Lokniti programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies; analyses of candidates' affidavits by the Association for Democratic Reforms; judgments of the Supreme Court on electoral matters; and scholarly books and journal articles. The analysis is organised around three explanatory dimensions (identity, leadership and political mobilisation) and assesses their consequences for four aspects of democratic transformation: participation,

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representation, responsiveness and electoral integrity. The study does not use primary survey data, and its conclusions are therefore limited by the coverage of existing sources.

5. Evolution of Electoral Politics in India

The development of electoral politics since independence may be divided into five broad phases:

1. **The Congress system (1952–1967).** The Indian National Congress dominated national and state politics, drawing support from almost all social groups through a network of local notables. Competition took place largely within the party (Kothari, 1964).
2. **Erosion of dominance and populist leadership (1967–1989).** Non-Congress coalitions won power in several states in 1967. Indira Gandhi responded with populist, leader-centred politics, exemplified by the slogan of removing poverty in 1971. The Emergency (1975–77) and the Janata victory of 1977 showed that voters could punish authoritarian rule.
3. **Mandal, Mandir and coalitions (1989–2014).** The implementation of reservations for Other Backward Classes in 1990, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the rise of regional and caste-based parties fragmented the party system. No party won a Lok Sabha majority between 1989 and 2009, and coalition governments became the norm (Yadav, 2000; Ziegfeld, 2016).
4. **A second dominant party system (2014–2024).** The BJP won majorities in 2014 and 2019, building a coalition across castes on the basis of Hindu identity, leadership appeal and welfare delivery (Chhibber & Verma, 2019).
5. **Renewed competition (2024 onwards).** In 2024 the BJP fell short of a majority and formed a government dependent on allies, while the opposition alliance gained ground, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

Table 1 summarises the outcomes of the four most recent general elections, which together show the rise of the second dominant party system and its partial reversal in 2024.

Table 1. Results of recent Lok Sabha elections (543 seats)

Election	Voter turnout (%)	Largest party (seats)	Second party (seats)	Character of outcome
2009	58.2	INC (206)	BJP (116)	Congress-led coalition re-elected
2014	66.4	BJP (282)	INC (44)	First single-party majority since 1984
2019	67.4	BJP (303)	INC (52)	Majority enlarged; dominant party consolidated
2024	65.8	BJP (240)	INC (99)	No single-party majority; coalition government

Source: Election Commission of India statistical reports (Election Commission of India, 2024).

Three features of these results deserve attention. First, turnout rose sharply in 2014 and remained high in 2019 and 2024, reflecting both intensified mobilisation and administrative efforts by the Election Commission to register and bring voters to the polls. Second, the swing between the two largest parties was very large across these elections, showing that the Indian electorate is far from frozen in its loyalties. Third, the 2024 result reversed the trend towards single-party dominance without restoring the earlier fragmentation: the two national parties together still won a majority of seats, but both depended on regional allies. The national party system thus appears to be moving towards a pattern of bipolar coalition competition, in which national parties lead alliances that include strong regional partners (Chhibber & Verma, 2019; Ziegfeld, 2016).

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6. Identity and Electoral Politics

6.1 Caste

Caste remains one of the most important bases of electoral mobilisation, but its role has changed. In the first decades, dominant landowning castes acted as intermediaries for the Congress. From the 1980s, backward castes and Dalits formed their own parties and leaders, such as the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Bahujan Samaj Party founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984, producing what Jaffrelot (2003) called a silent revolution. The BJP later built support among non-dominant backward castes and non-Jatav Dalits by giving them representation and leadership positions, broadening its base beyond the upper castes (Chhibber & Verma, 2019). In 2024, the Samajwadi Party's appeal to backward castes, Dalits and minorities helped it win 37 seats in Uttar Pradesh, showing that caste coalitions remain fluid and contestable. Demands for a caste census, strengthened by Bihar's caste survey of 2023, have brought questions of representation and social justice back to the centre of political debate.

6.2 Religion

Religious identity has become more prominent since the Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The BJP's ideology of Hindu nationalism has sought to unite Hindus across caste lines, and its electoral success in 2014 and 2019 owed much to this consolidation (Jaffrelot, 2021). Religious polarisation has been associated in some states with communal violence, which earlier research found to have electoral roots where parties stood to gain from mobilising one community against another (Wilkinson, 2004). At the same time, the representation of Muslims in the Lok Sabha has fallen well below their share of the population, raising questions about inclusion. Research also shows that religious minorities do not vote as a single bloc on identity alone but weigh parties' capacity to defeat rivals and to provide security (Heath et al., 2015).

6.3 Region and language

Regional and linguistic identities underlie the strength of regional parties in states such as Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Punjab. These parties combine appeals to regional pride and language with welfare programmes and strong leaders. Regional parties became central to national coalitions after 1989, and they continue to shape national outcomes, as the 2024 election showed in states where they resisted or allied with national parties (Ziegfeld, 2016).

6.4 Gender

One of the most significant transformations has been the rise of women as an electoral constituency. The gap between male and female turnout, large in early elections, has narrowed steadily, and in recent general elections women's turnout has been close to or above that of men. Parties have responded with programmes aimed at women, including cooking-gas connections, housing in women's names and monthly cash transfers introduced by several state governments. The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, which reserves one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women once delimitation is carried out after the next census, may further transform representation. Women nevertheless remain under-represented among candidates and members of legislatures.

6.5 Class and welfare beneficiaries

Class has rarely been an explicit basis of party competition in India, but economic interests shape voting through welfare programmes. Since 2014, the Union government has emphasised direct benefit transfers, free food grains, housing, toilets and health insurance, creating a large category of beneficiaries who identify their gains with the

national leadership (Aiyar, 2019). This "new welfarism" has created a form of identity based on being a recipient of state benefits, which cuts across caste and religion and has become a major resource for incumbents at both national and state levels.

6.6 Youth and first-time voters

India has one of the youngest electorates in the world, and each general election adds tens of millions of first-time voters. Young voters are more exposed to social media, more concerned about education and employment, and less bound by inherited party loyalties than older generations. Parties have responded with campaigns built around aspiration, national pride and job creation, and the mobilisation of students and unemployed youth has periodically shaped electoral outcomes. Unemployment emerged as one of the most frequently cited concerns of voters in 2024 (Lokniti-CSDS, 2024), suggesting that generational and economic identities may become more important alongside caste and religion in future elections.

7. Leadership and Electoral Politics

Leadership has shaped Indian elections in several distinct ways:

- **Charismatic national leadership.** Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi each personified the government and the party in the eyes of voters. Sircar (2020) showed that in 2019 many voters cast their ballots on the basis of trust in the leader rather than evaluation of local candidates or parties, a pattern that presidentialised parliamentary elections.
- **Regional and social-justice leaders.** Leaders such as N. T. Rama Rao, M. G. Ramachandran, Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Lalu Prasad, Mamata Banerjee and Naveen Patnaik built parties around their personal appeal and the identities they represented, often through direct connection with voters and welfare programmes.
- **Dynastic leadership.** Many parties, national and regional, are led by members of political families. Dynasties provide continuity and recognition but limit intra-party democracy and opportunities for new leaders.
- **Movement leadership.** Leaders who emerged from movements, such as Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1970s and the anti-corruption campaign of 2011 that gave rise to the Aam Aadmi Party, have periodically disrupted established parties.

The concentration of authority in individual leaders has advantages: it simplifies electoral choice, provides a clear centre of accountability and can mobilise voters who are indifferent to parties. It also carries risks, including the weakening of party organisations, the marginalisation of legislatures and cabinets, and the treatment of elections as plebiscites on a leader rather than as contests over policy (Varshney, 2019). The 2024 results suggested that leadership appeal, while still powerful, could not by itself overcome local discontent, unemployment and concern among some groups about constitutional guarantees and reservations.

8. Political Mobilisation

8.1 Party organisation and ideological networks

Parties differ greatly in their organisational strength. The BJP's electoral machinery, supported by the network of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliates, has developed booth-level organisation, cadre training and continuous contact with voters, which scholars regard as a major source of its success (Palshikar et al., 2017; Jaffrelot, 2021). The Congress, by contrast, has struggled to rebuild its organisation, although the Bharat Jodo Yatra of 2022–23 showed an attempt to revive mass contact through a long padyatra across the country. Cadre-based parties of the left and regional parties with strong local networks have also relied on organisation rather than only on leadership.

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8.2 Social movements and mobilisation from below

Social movements have repeatedly changed the agenda of electoral politics. The JP movement contributed to the defeat of the Congress in 1977; the Dalit movement inspired by B. R. Ambedkar and organised by Kanshi Ram transformed the representation of Dalits in northern India; the Ram Janmabhoomi movement reshaped the party system; the farmers' protests of 2020–21 led to the repeal of three farm laws; and anti-corruption mobilisation in 2011 created a new party. Movements show that political mobilisation in India is not only organised by parties from above but also arises from civil society (Tarrow, 2011).

8.3 Welfare, clientelism and money

Clientelism, the exchange of material benefits for political support, has long been part of Indian electoral politics (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). In recent years, programmatic welfare delivered through digital transfers has partly replaced discretionary local patronage, although distributions of cash and gifts during campaigns remain common. The cost of elections has risen sharply. Vaishnav (2017) showed that candidates facing criminal cases are attractive to parties because they bring money and can promise to get things done, and analyses of candidates' affidavits show that a substantial share of members elected in 2024 had declared criminal cases against themselves (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2024). In February 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bond scheme as unconstitutional, holding that anonymous corporate donations violated voters' right to information (Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India, 2024).

8.4 Media and digital mobilisation

Television, social media and messaging platforms have transformed campaigning. Parties use data analytics, WhatsApp groups, social media influencers and targeted messages to reach voters, often in regional languages. Digital tools have lowered the cost of communication and allowed new actors to participate, but they have also spread misinformation, polarising content and, more recently, AI-generated material. Unequal access to resources gives well-funded parties a large advantage in digital campaigning, and regulation by the Election Commission has struggled to keep pace with new technologies.

8.5 Electoral institutions and the conduct of elections

The credibility of electoral politics rests on the institutions that conduct elections. The Election Commission of India, a constitutional body under Article 324, has earned wide respect for organising elections on an enormous scale, using electronic voting machines since the late 1990s and voter-verifiable audit trails since the 2010s, and enforcing a Model Code of Conduct during campaigns. Its authority has nevertheless been questioned in recent years, through debates over the timing of election schedules, the enforcement of the Model Code against senior leaders and the procedure for appointing Election Commissioners. In April 2024 the Supreme Court rejected petitions seeking a return to physical ballots or the full counting of audit slips, while directing additional safeguards for the storage and verification of voting machines. Maintaining the independence and perceived neutrality of electoral institutions is therefore a central condition for electoral politics to continue to transform democracy rather than to erode trust in it.

9. Democratic Transformation: Gains and Concerns

The interaction of identity, leadership and mobilisation has transformed Indian democracy in ways that are both positive and troubling. The main gains are:

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- **Wider participation.** Turnout has risen over time, and the poor, rural voters, backward classes, Dalits, Adivasis and women participate at high rates, which distinguishes India from many established democracies (Yadav, 2000; Banerjee, 2014).
- **Broader representation.** Legislatures and governments now include many more members of backward classes and Dalits than in the early decades, and leaders from these communities have headed state governments (Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009).
- **Peaceful alternation.** Governments at the Centre and in states have repeatedly lost elections and handed over power, demonstrating the vitality of electoral competition.
- **Responsiveness through welfare.** Competition for the votes of the poor has encouraged parties to expand welfare programmes, especially for women and rural households (Aiyar, 2019).

- The main concerns are:
- **Polarisation.** Mobilisation along religious lines has deepened social divisions and reduced the political representation of minorities (Jaffrelot, 2021).
- **Personalisation of power.** Elections centred on individual leaders can weaken parties, legislatures and collective decision-making (Varshney, 2019).
- **Money and criminality.** High campaign costs and the presence of candidates with criminal cases undermine the fairness and quality of representation (Vaishnav, 2017).
- **Uneven playing field.** Disparities in campaign finance and media access, and debates over the neutrality of institutions, affect public confidence in electoral competition.

These gains and concerns are not separate processes but two faces of the same transformation. The mobilisation of identities that brought backward classes and Dalits into power also created incentives for parties to build majorities on religious identity; the leadership that energised voters also concentrated authority; and the welfare competition that made governments responsive also blurred the line between public programmes and party propaganda. Whether Indian democracy deepens or erodes depends less on whether identity, leadership and mobilisation are present, for they are present in every democracy, than on whether they operate within institutions that guarantee fair competition, protect minorities and hold leaders accountable between elections. The experience of the last decade suggests that electoral competition remains vigorous, while the institutional safeguards around it require renewed attention (Varshney, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021).

10. State Elections and Regional Variation

Electoral politics in India is not a single national story. State elections follow their own logic, and voters frequently choose differently in state and national elections held close together. Several patterns stand out:

- **Strong regional party systems.** In Tamil Nadu, two Dravidian parties have alternated in power for decades, and national parties remain junior partners. In West Bengal and Odisha, regional parties led by strong leaders dominated state politics for long periods, although Odisha's regional party lost power in 2024.
- **Alternation and anti-incumbency.** In states such as Kerala, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, voters long tended to replace the ruling party at each election, rewarding opposition parties and keeping governments responsive.

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- **New entrants.** The Aam Aadmi Party, born from the anti-corruption movement of 2011, won power in Delhi and later in Punjab, showing that new parties can still break into established systems through movement-based mobilisation.
- **Split-ticket voting.** Voters in states such as Delhi and Odisha have at times supported one party in Lok Sabha elections and another in assembly elections, indicating that they distinguish between national leadership and state governance.

This regional variation is itself a source of democratic resilience. It ensures that no single party or leader controls all levels of government, gives voters several opportunities to express their preferences, and allows regional identities and leaders to influence national politics through coalitions (Ziegfeld, 2016; Yadav, 2000).

11. The 2024 General Election as a Moment of Transformation

The 2024 Lok Sabha election shows how identity, leadership and mobilisation continue to reshape Indian democracy. The BJP remained the largest party with 240 seats but lost its majority, forming a government that depends on allies such as the Telugu Desam Party and the Janata Dal (United). The Congress nearly doubled its tally to 99 seats, and regional parties within the opposition alliance performed strongly. Post-poll surveys indicated that concerns about unemployment and price rise, the mobilisation of backward castes and Dalits around the protection of the Constitution and reservations, and local discontent with incumbent representatives weakened the ruling coalition in several states, especially Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra (Lokniti-CSDS, 2024). At the same time, the BJP gained ground in states such as Odisha and Andhra Pradesh through alliances and anti-incumbency against regional governments.

The outcome suggests three lessons. First, identity coalitions are fluid: social groups that supported the dominant party in 2019 could be mobilised by rivals around issues of social justice. Second, leadership appeal has limits when voters are dissatisfied with economic conditions and local representatives. Third, coalition politics, which many had considered a feature of the past, has returned to the national level, renewing the role of regional parties in national decision-making (Ziegfeld, 2016). The election thus reaffirmed the capacity of Indian voters to restore balance in the party system through the ballot.

12. Suggestions for Strengthening Electoral Democracy

The analysis points to several measures that could strengthen the democratic quality of electoral politics:

1. **Transparent political finance.** After the invalidation of electoral bonds, a transparent system of political funding with disclosure of donors, limits on corporate contributions and consideration of partial state funding of elections is needed.
2. **Decriminalisation of politics.** Fast-track trial of cases against legislators and stricter disqualification norms for persons charged with serious offences would improve the quality of representation.
3. **Intra-party democracy.** Regular internal elections, transparent candidate selection and limits on dynastic control would strengthen parties as institutions rather than as vehicles of individual leaders.
4. **Inclusive representation.** Timely implementation of women's reservation and measures to encourage the nomination of candidates from under-represented communities, including religious minorities, would deepen representation.
5. **Regulation of digital campaigns.** Clear rules on political advertising, data use, misinformation and synthetic media, enforced by the Election Commission with adequate powers, are needed.
6. **Institutional independence.** Safeguarding the independence and credibility of the Election Commission and

other electoral institutions is essential for public confidence in electoral outcomes.

13. Conclusion

Electoral politics has been the engine of democratic transformation in India. Through successive elections, social groups once excluded from power have entered legislatures and governments, women have emerged as a decisive electorate, and governments have been made to respond to the demands of the poor. Identity has served both as a means of empowering marginalised communities and as a basis for polarisation; leadership has both mobilised voters and concentrated power; and political mobilisation has ranged from social movements and party organisation to welfare delivery, money and digital campaigns. The rise and partial decline of a second dominant party system between 2014 and 2024 shows that the Indian electorate continues to reshape the balance of power. The future of Indian democracy will depend on whether these forces are channelled through fair, transparent and inclusive institutions. Strengthening electoral integrity, intra-party democracy and representation would allow electoral politics to continue to deepen democracy rather than merely to change governments.

The Indian experience also offers a broader lesson for democratic theory. Elections in a diverse and unequal society do not simply aggregate fixed preferences; they create, reshape and politicise identities, elevate leaders and drive new forms of mobilisation. This dynamism is the source of both the inclusiveness and the fragility of Indian democracy. The task for citizens, parties and institutions is to preserve the openness that has allowed new groups to claim power, while guarding against the use of electoral majorities to weaken the rights and institutions on which democratic competition itself depends.

Limitations and future research. The study relies on secondary sources and on survey findings reported by other researchers. Future research could use constituency-level data and field surveys to examine how identity, leadership and mobilisation interact in particular states, and could study the effects of digital campaigning and women-centred welfare on voting behaviour over time.

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