



# **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

**Takshashila School of Civil Services**

# Why are electoral reforms necessary?

Since when have votes been registered solely through Electronic Voting Machines? Why have certain Opposition parties accused the EC of electoral roll manipulation? Should criminal cases of politicians standing for elections be given wide publicity?

## EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

### The story so far

**T**he Election Commission (EC) has invited political parties to discuss strengthening the election process. This is in wake of the allegations of manipulation of electoral rolls during the recently concluded assembly elections and issues raised with respect to duplicate Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers in different States.

### What are the legal provisions?

Article 324 of the Constitution provides that the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to the Parliament and State legislature shall be vested in the EC. The preparation of electoral rolls is governed by the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and related rules, including Registration of Electors Rules, 1960.

The voting process has undergone tectonic changes since the first general election in 1952. In the first two general elections of 1952 and 1957, a separate box was placed for each candidate with their election symbol. Voters had to drop a blank ballot paper into the box of the candidate whom they wanted to vote for. It is only from the third general election in 1962 that ballot papers with names and symbols of candidates was introduced. Subsequently, since the 2004 general elections to the Lok Sabha, Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) have been used in all constituencies. Since 2019, EVMs have been backed by 100% Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips in all constituencies.

### What are the issues?

There have been a series of issues raised in the past with respect to the voting and counting process. First, there were demands through a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) for reverting to paper ballot papers which was dismissed by the Supreme Court in April 2024. Second, the same PIL demanded 100% matching of VVPAT with EVM count, which at present is carried out for five machines per assembly constituency/segment. The Supreme court, while dismissing this demand as well, had directed that the burnt memory of microcontrollers of 5% of EVMs, which includes that of control units, ballot units, VVPATs, in every assembly segment can be checked and verified by a team of engineers of the EVM manufacturers in case of any suspicion of tampering. The exercise needs to be initiated via a written request from candidates who are placed second or third in a constituency, within seven days of the declaration of election results.

Third, there were allegations of manipulation of electoral rolls in the run up to the Maharashtra and Delhi Assembly elections. The Opposition parties alleged that large number of bogus/fake voters were added to the electoral roll to benefit the ruling party at the Centre. The fourth and current issue relates to identical EPIC numbers for voters belonging to different States like West Bengal, Gujarat, Haryana and Punjab. Opposition parties such as the Trinamool Congress allege that it vindicates their claim of bogus voters being included in the voters' list. The EC has explained that duplication may have arisen because of the earlier decentralised system for allotting EPIC



**Need for a revamp:** Poll officials carrying EVMs enter the Patparganj counting centre for the Delhi Assembly polls, in New Delhi, on February 8. PTI

numbers before shifting to the centralised database on the EONET platform. It clarified that irrespective of the EPIC number, an elector can cast his/her vote only in their designated polling station in their State or Union Territory.

Apart from the above issues in the election process, there are significant issues related to the campaign process that have to be addressed. First, 'Star Campaigners' of most parties have been guilty of using inappropriate and abusive words against leaders of other political parties, appealing to caste/communal feelings of electors, and making unsubstantiated allegations. Second, candidates of all major political parties breach the election expenditure limit by a wide margin. Further, there are no limits on political party spending during elections. The Centre for Media Studies has estimated that the expenditure during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was close to ₹1,00,000 crore by various political parties. Such inflated election expenditure fuels corruption resulting in a vicious cycle. Third, as per the report of the Association of Democratic Reforms, the issue of criminalisation of politics has almost reached its nadir with 251 (46%) of the 543 elected MPs in 2024, having criminal cases against them. Of them 170 (31%) face serious criminal charges including rape, murder, attempt to murder and kidnapping.

### What are the required reforms?

Free and fair elections is part of the basic structure of our Constitution as declared by the Supreme Court in various cases.

With respect to the electoral process of voting and counting, the following reforms need to be considered and implemented. First, as regards the EVM and VVPAT related aspects, the sample size for the matching of EVM count and VVPAT slips should be decided in a scientific manner by dividing each State into large regions. In case of even a single error, VVPAT slips should be counted fully for the concerned region. This would instil statistically significant confidence in the counting process. Further, as recommended by the EC in 2016, in order to provide a degree of cover for voters at the booth level, 'totaliser' machines can be introduced that would aggregate votes in 14 EVMs before revealing the candidate-wise count. The candidates placed second or third should also utilise the direction of the Supreme Court to demand the verification of 5% of EVMs in each assembly segment in case of any suspected tampering. If any issue is identified, it should be suitably addressed and if there are none, it would put to rest the political speculation.

Second, to address the apprehension of inclusion of fake voters and duplicate EPIC cards, the process of linking citizens' Aadhaar number with EPIC cards may be considered after detailed discussions with all stakeholders and dispelling concerns around right to privacy. Meanwhile, the EC should remove any duplicate voter ID numbers in the electoral roll across States and ensure unique EPIC numbers.

Equally important, if not more, are the reforms needed in the campaign process. First, the EC should be authorised to

revoke the 'Star Campaigner' status of a leader. In case of any serious violation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), thereby depriving the party candidates of expenditure relief for their campaigns. Under Paragraph 16A of the Symbols order, the EC has the power to suspend or withdraw the recognition of a recognised political party for its failure to observe MCC or follow lawful directions of the Commission. Strict action under this provision against bigger parties would have a salutary effect in ensuring adherence to the MCC. Second, with respect to election expenditure, the law must be amended to explicitly provide that 'financial assistance' by a political party to its candidate should also be within the limits of election expenditure prescribed for a candidate. There should also be a ceiling on expenditure by political parties. Third, the Supreme Court direction to candidates as well as political parties to issue declarations about criminal antecedents, at least three times before election, in a widely circulated newspaper in the locality and in electronic media, should be strictly enforced. This would enable a discerning voter in exercising a well-informed choice.

The EC and various political parties should engage in a meaningful discussion on all these aspects so that the campaign and electoral processes instil confidence in voters at large.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. He currently trains civil service aspirants at Officers IAS Academy. Views expressed are personal.

## THE GIST

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## Key Achievements of Election Commission of India

Growth from 1951 to 2024

### Eligible Voters

17 Cr	97 Cr
1951	2024

### Voting Turnout

44.87%	65.79%
1951	2024

### Polling Stations

1.96 Lakh	10.52 Lakh
1951	2024

### Gender Ratio

(Female electors per 1000 males)

926	946
2019	2024



## Key Functions of Election Commission of India



### Election Management

Supervises, directs, controls, and conducts free and fair elections



### Electoral Rolls

Prepares electoral rolls for Lok Sabha & State Assemblies



### Party Recognition

Grants recognition to political parties at National and State levels



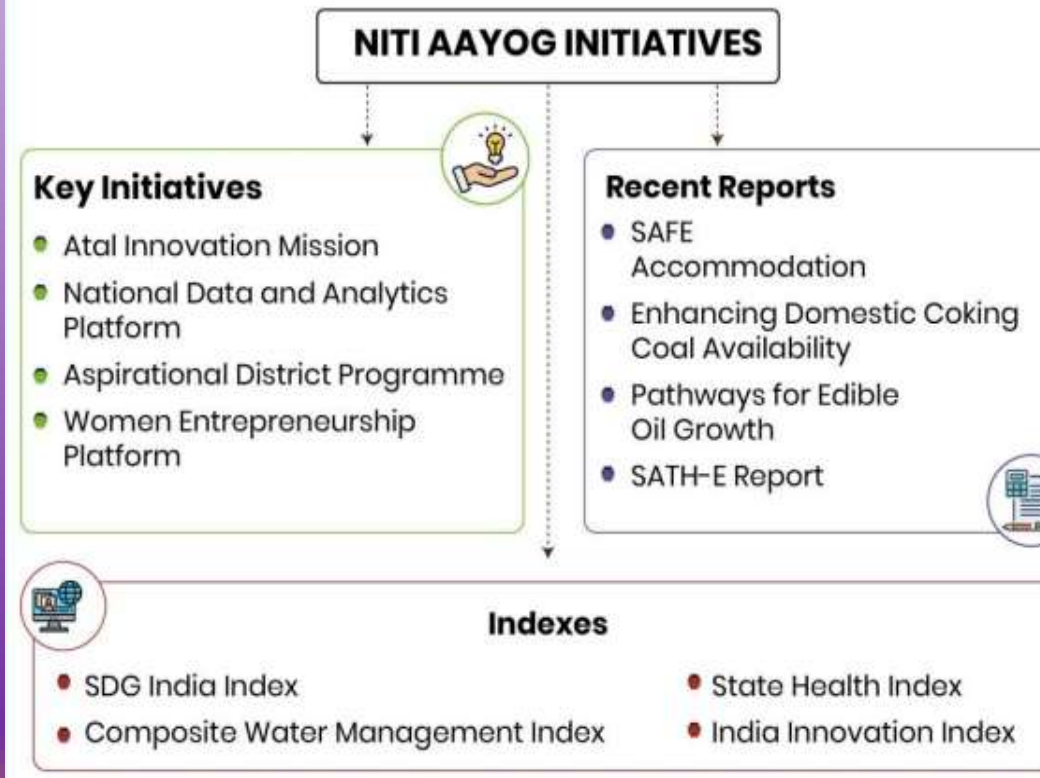
### Model Code of Conduct

Determines and announces rules for fair and impartial elections

## Key-Initiatives of ECI

- **Electronic Voting Machine (EVM):** Microcontroller-based **portable** device introduced in 1977; piloted in 1982 to modernize elections.
- **Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP):** Launched in 2009 to promote voter education, awareness, and literacy.
- **cVIGIL App (2018):** Introduced in 2018 to let citizens report Model Code of Conduct (MCC) violations.
- **Introduction of Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT):** Introduced in 2013 for a verifiable paper trail, enhancing transparency.
- **National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP):** Launched in 2015 to create error-free and authenticated electoral rolls.
- **International Co-Operation:** ECI is a founding member of the **Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB)**, **Stockholm** and **Commonwealth Electoral Network (CEN)**.

## NITI Aayog Initiatives, Reports, and Indexes



## Challenges with NITI Aayog's Policy Influence and Implementation

- 
**Budgetary Constraints**  
 Without budgetary allocation powers, it struggles to impact resource allocation.
- 
**Inter-State Disparity**  
 Fails to address developmental inequalities among states effectively.
- 
**Overlapping Roles**  
 Overlapping responsibilities with other ministries create confusion in policymaking.
- 
**Lacks Statutory Status**  
 NITI Aayog's lack of legal status limits its policy enforcement power.
- 
**Non-Binding Recommendations**  
 Its advisory role results in weak influence over state-level policies implementation.



# What is Elon Musk's Starlink all about?

What is Starlink, and how does it work? Why does it face regulatory hurdles in India? Why hasn't India auctioned satellite spectrum? What impact could U.S. trade pressure have on Starlink's approval? What government approvals does Starlink need?

VK IAS telegram: [t.me/hinduhighlights](https://t.me/hinduhighlights)

## EXPLAINER

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

**B**harti Airtel and Reliance Jio have signed distribution pacts with SpaceX Corp.'s Starlink service to bring satellite internet access to India. The distribution pacts are a reversal from the telecom industry's reluctance to quickly make the Starlink service available in India without auctions for the satellite airwaves.

What is Starlink?

Starlink is a low-earth orbit constellation of over 7,000 satellites that provide internet access to users with ground terminals, which the Elon Musk-owned SpaceX is already selling in around 40 countries. The satellites constantly orbit the earth, blanketing practically its entire habitable surface with coverage, as long as a given terminal on the ground has visibility to the sky.

The service offers speeds of around 100 megabits per second, comparable with many home broadband connections. However, the "latency," or the time it takes for a given data packet to travel between a user and terrestrial internet networks, is higher than wired broadband connections in offices and homes.

Satellites work in conjunction with ground stations on earth, which are physically connected to the internet like any other network and beam up connections wirelessly to satellites above them at any given point.

In India, Starlink may not be that useful in cities and towns with good 5G connectivity or wired broadband coverage, as local speeds and reliability will far exceed what a satellite link currently offers, even with technological advancements. However, in rural and remote areas where "terrestrial" networks have not penetrated deeply,



Entry delayed: In India, Starlink has faced several regulatory hurdles. REUTERS

Starlink can offer decent connectivity almost instantly.

How much does Starlink cost?

There are two costs associated with Starlink: the user terminal – essentially a router – required to access the satellite network and the monthly access fee to stay connected. At present, a residential kit in parts of the U.S. costs \$149, while a portable "roaming" kit costs \$349. Import duty, GST and social welfare surcharges applicable on satellite equipment may push up the hardware price by around 30%.

Without any introductory pricing on the hardware, the equipment may cost anywhere between ₹17,000 and ₹40,000, not including shipping costs from the U.S., where it is developed and manufactured.

Besides this, unlimited residential and roaming plans range from \$120-\$165 in the U.S. It is not a given that this price will be any lower in India, as the cost to provide Starlink service is, by nature of the technology, the same everywhere on earth. Notably, in Bhutan, where Starlink launched this year, it is priced at 4,200 to 8,400 ngultrum, which may be an

indication of the Indian price as well. The Bhutanese currency is pegged to the rupee at parity.

A higher-priced plan for users on the move, called "mobile priority" is available at 21,000 ngultrum (or therefore rupees) per month and offers priority access in case of network congestion.

When will Starlink be available in India?

Starlink has faced several regulatory hurdles, the sharpest among them being the Indian government's heavy scrutiny of internet services in general and a technology that could provide access anywhere in the country in particular.

SpaceX needs to obtain a Global Mobile Personal Communications by Satellite (GMPCS) authorisation under the Telecommunications Act, 2023. While this authorisation existed in a different form under the Telegraph Act, 1885, the updated rules under the new Act have yet to be published, and it is unclear if the government will issue such an authorisation under the previous law's subordinate legislation, even though it remains technically in force.

As a part of this authorisation, SpaceX

had to convince the Indian government to accept its contentions on revealing corporate ownership data, something it resisted on investor privacy grounds abroad. While reports suggest that this particular hurdle has been passed, the company still needs to obtain a security clearance from the Ministry of Home Affairs. It remains unclear if such a clearance has been obtained.

It is also uncertain whether the company's ground stations in India – where the Telecom Act requires tapping equipment installed onsite to give law enforcement authorities access to the network, a requirement that exists for other internet networks as well – are currently operational.

Finally, Starlink also needs to be allotted wireless spectrum through which it can offer its services. The government has indicated that like other countries, it will not auction this spectrum, as these are narrow beams that can be shared with other providers, unlike the signals emitted by telecom towers on the ground. Telcos have – before tying up with Starlink this year – demanded that this spectrum be auctioned, something that would be a global first. Reliance Jio has commissioned legal opinions that state that auction is the only way to allot satellite spectrum, due to the Supreme Court's 2012 judgment in the 2G scam case, where the top court held that all scarce natural resources must be allocated by auction.

It is unclear if these hurdles will be cleared on time. However, Mr. Musk's ascendancy in the U.S. government, along with trade pressure from President Donald Trump's administration, has boosted speculation that the government may facilitate Starlink's entry in short order.

Aside from Airtel and Jio's commercial distribution agreements, there have not been any official announcements on forward movement from a regulatory point of view.

## THE GIST

Starlink needs GMPCS authorisation, security clearance, and spectrum allocation, but government scrutiny and legal challenges have delayed its approval in India.

It is more useful in rural areas than in cities with strong 5G and broadband.

Airtel and Jio have signed distribution agreements with Starlink, despite earlier demands for a spectrum auction. Government decisions on spectrum allocation and U.S. trade pressure may influence Starlink's entry.