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Q14

To enhance the quality of democracy in India the Election Commission of India has proposed electoral reforms in 2016. What are the suggested reforms and how far are they significant to make democracy successful? (250 words).

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS II · 15 marks · Constitutional Bodies

Appointment to various Constitutional posts, powers, functions and responsibilities of various Constitutional Bodies.

Core demand of the question

- To enhance the quality of democracy in India the **Election Commission of India** has proposed electoral reforms in 2016. What are the suggested reforms and how far are they significant to make democracy successful?

Revision summary

In 2016 the ECI pushed disqualification on serious charges, false-affidavit teeth, **paid news** and bribery as live offences.

It asked for a ceiling on party expenditure, one-constituency contests, a vote totaliser, and a freeze on government ads.

Independence of the Commission's secretariat, finances and appointments was part of the same bundle.

These reforms matter because money, crime and a weak referee hollow out adult franchise.

Lists succeed only when they become statute and practice.

Introduction

Free and fair elections are how Indian democracy authorises government. In 2016 the **Election Commission of India** pressed a known bundle of reforms - on criminalisation, money, **paid news**, party finance, and the Commission's own independence - so that the vote remains a choice, not a purchase or a fear. Significance is measured by whether those suggestions close the gap between adult franchise and equal political influence.

Body**Suggested reforms pressed around 2016**

- **Decriminalisation:** disqualify a candidate against whom a court has framed charges for a serious offence punishable with a long term of imprisonment, instead of waiting for a rare final conviction.
- **False affidavit:** make a lie in Form 26 a ground for prompt disqualification, not only a delayed prosecution.
- **Paid news and bribery:** treat **paid news** as a corrupt practice and make bribery of electors a cognizable offence so that police can act in time, not after the result.

- **Money power:** put a legal ceiling on the expenditure of political parties, not only of candidates, and audit party accounts with the Commission's teeth, not only with voluntary statements.
- **One constituency rule:** allow a person to contest from only one seat, so that bye-elections do not mock the first mandate.
- **Totaliser:** mix votes of several polling stations before counting, so that a booth-level vendor of fear cannot see which hamlet voted which way.
- **Government advertising:** freeze taxpayer-funded publicity for a period before the announcement of polls, so that the ruling party does not campaign on the Consolidated Fund.
- **Independence of the Commission:** an independent secretariat, charge of expenditure on the Consolidated Fund, and a collegial, bipartisan method of appointing **Election Commissioners**, so that the referee is not a ministry's guest.
- **Inner-party democracy and registration:** require parties to hold regular elections and to disclose donors above a low threshold if they want the privileges of the Symbols Order.
- **Inclusive franchise:** easier proxy or e-postal voting for service voters and a workable overseas-electors method, plus a common electoral roll for local, State and national polls to cut duplication.

How far they matter for successful democracy

- Success here means competitive, peaceful, and reasonably equal elections whose loser still accepts the count. Criminalisation and cash undermine that more than any missing electronic gadget.
- Charge-sheet disqualification is significant if it is paired with fast-track trials; used alone it can be abused through motivated complaints. The direction is right; the drafting must protect the innocent.
- Party expenditure caps and donor disclosure attack the real budget of Indian elections. Candidate ceilings without party ceilings are a leaky bucket. This is among the highest-yield reforms.
- **Paid news** and bribery as live offences protect the poor voter whose ballot is bought in kind. Without them, the Model Code is a sermon.
- The totaliser protects secret suffrage in villages where social power reads booth data as a hit list. That is quality of democracy at the polling station, not only in Delhi.
- Institutional independence of the ECI is the reform that makes every other reform enforceable. A weak referee cannot police strong parties.
- **One-seat contest and advertising freeze are modest but clean:** they reduce waste, incumbency abuse, and cynicism.
- Some 2016 ideas later moved in the opposite political direction (for example opaque party funding instruments). That shows significance: the suggestions named the right diseases even when the statute did not always take the Commission's medicine.

Limit of reform lists

- Electoral reform cannot replace inner-party ticket distribution, social cleavage, or the first-past-the-post map. It can still make the contest cleaner.
- Democracy is successful when the ECI's suggestions become law and practice, not when they remain annual memoranda.

Flow diagram

ECI 2016 reform set -> Crime and false affidavit
ECI 2016 reform set -> Party spend paid news bribery
ECI 2016 reform set -> Totaliser one seat ad freeze
ECI 2016 reform set -> Independent ECI secretariat
Crime and false affidavit -> Cleaner contest
Party spend paid news bribery -> Cleaner contest
Independent ECI secretariat -> Cleaner contest

Conclusion

The 2016 reform set aimed at crime, cash, **paid news**, party finance, booth secrecy, incumbency advertising, and a more independent Commission. Those items are highly significant for a successful democracy because they equalise the voter against fear and money. They work only if Parliament writes them as enforceable law and if the referee stays independent.

Facts & figures

Article 324

Superintendence, direction and control of elections in the **Election Commission of India**.

Charge-sheet disqualification proposal

ECI view that framing of charges in heinous offences should bar candidature, subject to safeguards.

Party expenditure ceiling

Candidate limits exist in law; the Commission asked for a matching cap and audit of party spend.

EVM totaliser

Device to mix several booth results so that community-wise targeting from booth data is harder.

Paid news

ECI long sought to make paid news a distinct electoral corrupt practice with timely penalty.

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