

ELECTORAL SILENCE: UNOPPOSED ELECTIONS AND THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rising instances of unopposed elections in India poses a subtle yet significant challenge to the integrity of the democratic process in India which affects not only local level elections but also at the national level elections. Although unopposed elections are comparatively rare in parliamentary elections, recent instances such as the 2024 Surat Lok Sabha seat election, have raised serious concerns about the gradual erosion of electoral competition. This paper explores the underlying causes behind such unopposed elections, examining legal loopholes, political dominance, coercive tactics, and flawed nomination processes which often contribute to a lack of genuine electoral contests. Political monopolies and strategic withdrawals by opposition parties motivated by alliances or strategic calculations aggravate this problem which leads to diminishing democratic engagement among the voters.

Importantly, the rarity of unopposed elections in parliamentary elections should not obscure the potential of such events in undermining democratic legitimacy. The absence of electoral choice in an election deprives the citizens of that constituency their right to make a meaningful participation which is the cornerstone of representative governance. To address this, the research paper proposes several key reforms including the introduction of a mandatory minimum vote threshold for unopposed candidates, the reopening of nominations in cases of mass withdrawals, and measures to strengthen opposition participation. These proposals aim to address procedural flaws and ensure that electoral contests remain competitive and reflective of the electorate's will.

The growing judicial interest in this issue reflected in the Supreme Court's recent willingness to examine the legal and constitutional dimensions of uncontested victories underscores the need for timely reform. These interventions are critical in order to preserve the integrity of the electoral process and sustain the public trust in democratic institutions. While the problem has not yet reached a crisis point at the national level elections, proactive measures are essential to prevent further deterioration of electoral fairness and democratic accountability.

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**"Voting is the expression of our commitment to ourselves, one another, this country,
and this world.**

- Sharon Salzberg

INTRODUCTION

Rooted on the Constitutional ideal of representative governance, India stands as world's largest electoral democracy which conducts electoral polls at every level right from the national parliament to the grassroot village panchayats. Elections act as cornerstone of democratic participation by offering citizens the opportunity to choose their representative. But over time, an alarming pattern has surfaced where a sizable number of representatives are elected without a single vote being casted by the citizens of that electoral constituency. These are instances of unopposed elections, in which a candidate is declared the winner automatically after the nomination and withdrawal stages.

While the problem of unopposed elections is not new, recently there has been some judicial attention towards the issue, especially by the apex court of the country. Recently, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy filed a petition before Supreme Court of India in which the constitutionality of the provision under the Representation of People Act, 1951 was challenged. The challenged provision which is section 53(2) of the Act states that "If the number of such candidates is equal to the number of seats to be filled, the returning officer shall forthwith declare all such candidates to be duly elected to fill those seats." The main argument in the petition was that declaring a candidate as elected unopposed without contesting the electoral polling denies the voters of that particular constituency the opportunity of exercising the 'None of the Above' (NOTA) option, which consequently infringes the fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) of these citizens. Supreme Court, upon hearing these arguments has sought responses from the government and Election Commission of India. This move has the lead to the potential re-examination of the legal framework governing uncontested elections.¹

Unopposed elections are not illegal as there are legal provisions supporting the same in case there are no more than one candidate willing to contest the elections. However, such unopposed elections do raise certain concerns about the integrity of the political process and electoral democracy. Most of the times, unopposed elections are result of lack of political competition,

¹ Damini Nath, "Question before SC: are 'unopposed' election victories unconstitutional?", *The Indian Express*, Apr 27, 2025.

strategic withdrawals by the opposition which sometimes are even done due to intimidation or suppression. Similarly. In case of a party or group's having overwhelming power, candidates are deterred from running in the election which results in the election being declared unopposed and voters having no say about who shall be their representative.

This research paper explores the phenomenon of unopposed elections in India in depth. It investigates the legal basis and procedural aspects of unopposed elections, while looking into the historical and contemporary trends across states and levels of governance. The socio-political factors that lead to such outcomes and the democratic implications, particularly in terms of accountability and representation are something which also needs deeper consideration. Notable examples, such as the large-scale unopposed elections in the West Bengal panchayat polls (2018, 2023), or uncontested seats in the Rajya Sabha, illustrate the growing urgency of this issue. These instances challenge the assumption that elections inherently reflect the people's will and raise the critical question: Can democracy truly function where there is no electoral contest?

The research paper also looks into the possibility that whether unopposed elections are a symptom of more serious structural and political problems or merely an administrative issue. The aim of this research paper is to evaluate whether there are reforms necessary in order to preserve the democratic ideals established not only by the Constitution but also through various judicial pronouncements about free and fair elections that provide a true choice for the citizens of the electoral constituency. This will provide the basis for discussion and further throw light on the much-ignored element in the electoral process in India, thereby asserting that election and electoral practises must involve the spirit and substance of participatory governance.

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF UNOPPOSED ELECTIONS IN INDIA

India's electoral framework is built on the foundation of representative democracy wherein the authority to govern stems directly from the will of the citizens of the country which they exercise by voting the representative in the electoral process. This electoral process is conducted and governed by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and State Election Commissions (SECs) at different tiers of government. The commitment towards democratic governance in India is deeply rooted in the Constitutional framework which guarantees free and fair elections as a cornerstone of representative democracy. However, this free and fairness

of electoral process has been challenged by the rise of unopposed elections which has raised tensions between formal legality and democratic substance. While nothing can be said challenged about the legality and validity of the unopposed elections due to the current legal framework on elections, concerns arise due to ever increasing frequency, particularly at the grassroot levels of such unopposed elections, which have led to voter disenfranchisement, political concentration and erosion of democratic values.

The legitimacy of unopposed elections is grounded in the procedural framework established by the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and corresponding rules which govern elections to the local bodies. Under RPA, once the deadline for withdrawal of nominations has passed, and if only one candidate remains validly nominated, that candidate is deemed to have been elected automatically without the need to conduct a formal electoral poll. This provision effectively bypasses the voting process.² Similar provisions exist under state-specific laws for municipal and panchayat elections. For instance, the West Bengal Panchayat Elections Act, 2003, and Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 also provide mechanisms whereby uncontested candidates are declared elected after the withdrawal phase. These provisions treat uncontested elections as a normal outcome of the democratic process. However, the law does not mandate an election where there is no contest, even though the very essence of democracy lies in the availability of choice.

Unopposed elections are not new to India. In the early years following independence, such outcomes were often the result of political consensus, particularly at the local level or in smaller constituencies. However, with the rise of multiparty democracy and competitive politics, the expectation was that unopposed victories would decline over time. Contrary to that expectation, various state elections especially at the panchayat and municipal levels have witnessed significant numbers of unopposed results, raising concerns about electoral freedom and participatory deficits.

For instance, in West Bengal, the 2018 Panchayat Elections saw over 30% of seats filled without polling due to unopposed victories, leading to widespread criticism and legal challenges.³ The Calcutta High Court was approached in several petitions alleging political intimidation and denial of nomination access.⁴ Subsequently, the number in 2023 Panchayat

² Representation of the People Act, 1951, s. 53(2)

³ Suvojit Bagchi, "Trinamool Wins 30% Seats Uncontested", *The Hindu*, Apr. 30, 2018.

⁴ All India Trinamool Congress v. State of West Bengal, 2018.

Elections in same state saw a sharp decline to around 9.5% out of the total 73,887 panchayat seats⁵, yet around 7000 seats being elected unopposed/unchallenged cannot be termed as an ideal situation to any democratic process. The Calcutta High Court, in response to petitions filed by opposition parties and independent candidates, criticized the conduct of the 2023 West Bengal Panchayat elections. In its interim order, the Court noted that the state election machinery had failed to ensure free participation, particularly in districts like Murshidabad and Cooch Behar, where opposition candidates were physically obstructed from filing nominations. The Court highlighted the chilling effect of such administrative lapses and remarked that widespread unopposed wins in a competitive democracy indicate systemic failure. The matter was subsequently referred for further investigation. This judicial intervention strongly highlights the urgent need to monitor and regulate the nomination process more strictly.⁶

In Jammu & Kashmir, during the 2018 municipal elections, nearly 60% of the wards in the Kashmir Valley saw uncontested or vacant results, with many candidates deterred by threats from militant groups and calls for boycott.⁷ These examples suggest that unopposed elections are not confined to one region or political party but are symptomatic of broader structural and political challenges.

While often associated with local body elections, unopposed victories have occurred even in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's Parliament and the principal body of popular representation. Since 1951, there have been at least 35 instances of Members of Parliament (MPs) being elected unopposed to the Lok Sabha. Most of the unopposed Lok Sabha victories occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. In the first general election (1951–52), six candidates were elected unopposed while the second (1957) and third (1962) general elections saw 19 and 10 unopposed victories, respectively.⁸ These unopposed victories were often the result of political consensus, lack of organized opposition, or withdrawal of rival nominations, and were more common in reserved constituencies or remote regions.

⁵ Tanmay Chatterjee, "9.5% of West Bengal Panchayat Seats Uncontested, down from 34%", *Hindustan Times* June 23, 2023.

⁶ *Trinamool Congress v. State Election Commission*, W.P. No. 1892 of 2023 (Cal. H.C. July 7, 2023) (interim order).

⁷ Peerzada Ashiq, "J&K Municipal Polls: Over 60% Seats in Kashmir Go Uncontested," *The Hindu*, 4 Oct 2018

⁸ "35 Candidates Have Won Lok Sabha Polls Without A Contest So Far Since 1951", *NDTV India*, available at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/35-candidates-have-won-lok-sabha-polls-without-a-contest-so-far-since-1951-5498258> (last visited May 2, 2025).

Notably, the trend has entirely disappeared in recent decades, primarily due to the rise of multiparty competition, regional parties, and greater electoral participation. In the highly competitive electoral climate post-1990, even symbolic contests are filed to ensure no seat goes unchallenged. The resurgence of unopposed election occurred in General elections of 2024, when the candidate from Surat, Gujarat, secured the Lok Sabha seat without a single vote being cast after all other candidates were disqualified or withdrew from contesting the election. Majority of the nomination papers of candidates were rejected on technical grounds by the Returning Officer especially by citing common errors in proposer's signatures. This mass rejection also faced huge political backlash and outcry and it also marked the first unopposed Lok Sabha election in over three decades, the previous being the 1989 also from the same constituency of Surat, Gujarat.⁹

Unopposed elections are frequent in the Rajya Sabha, where MLAs elect MPs. Here, strategic withdrawals and party negotiations along with political agreements often lead to uncontested seats. A notable instance being that in 2020, all four Rajya Sabha seats from Gujarat were filled unopposed.

Given these patterns, it becomes crucial to distinguish between the contexts in which unopposed elections happen be it at the national level, state or even local level as the democratic implications of such elections often differ significantly. At the local level such as Gram Panchayats and Municipal Bodies, unopposed elections are far more common and often afflicted with serious allegations such as that of coercion, intimidation, or political manipulation. The lack of awareness or access to legal remedies in those lower levels also contributes to this issue. However, at the state and national level such as Legislative Assemblies and Lok Sabha, unopposed elections of candidates often result from political consensus or strategic alliances, which, while legal, may limit electoral competition and strike at the fundamental rights of the voters. In both cases, the absence of electoral contest restricts the electorate's role, and raises questions about accountability, representation, and public legitimacy.

⁹ "BJP Wins Surat Lok Sabha Seat Unopposed After Congress's Nominations Face Rejection", *The Wire*, available at <https://thewire.in/politics/bjp-wins-surat-lok-sabha-seat-unopposed-after-congresss-nominations-face-rejection> (last visited May 2, 2025).

CONSTITUTIONAL AND DEMOCRATIC CONCERNS

Although unopposed elections are legally valid, they raise serious constitutional and democratic concerns. The principle of Universal Adult Franchise, enshrined under Constitution assumes that voters will have a real choice between competing candidates.¹⁰ The Preamble and Article 14 underscore equality, implying every voter must have an equal and meaningful opportunity to participate. While the Constitution does not expressly bar unopposed elections, the structure and spirit of democratic governance presume competition as a fundamental element. Thus, uncontested victories, though procedurally valid, can undermine participatory democracy especially when they result from political coercion, exclusion, or manipulation.

The Supreme Court of India has consistently recognised that free and fair elections constitute a basic feature of the Constitution. In *Indira Nehru Gandhi v. Raj Narain*, the Court struck down provisions that interfered with electoral integrity, emphasising that electoral fairness is fundamental to democracy.¹¹ The basic structure doctrine, laid down in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*¹², establishes that constitutional principles such as electoral justice override mere procedural compliance. From this perspective, a technically valid election devoid of actual voter choice due to the absence of alternative candidates can be seen as violating the basic structure of the Constitution.

In *People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) v. Union of India*¹³, Supreme Court upheld the Right to Information about candidates, further reinforcing the notion that meaningful electoral choice is central to the right to vote. This decision underlined that informed and meaningful participation in elections is intrinsic to the right to vote. Unopposed elections, by eliminating electoral choice therefore impede this right and dilute the substantive content of democratic participation.

The introduction of NOTA (None of the Above) in *People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) vs Union of India*¹⁴, was an attempt to empower the voter's negative choice. Supreme Court ruled that Constitution protects a right not to vote as part of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. However, the relevance of NOTA is rendered void in an uncontested

¹⁰ Constitution of India, 1950, Art. 326

¹¹ AIR 1975 SC 1590

¹² AIR 1973 SC 1461

¹³ AIR 2003 SC 2363

¹⁴ (2013) 10 S.C.C. 1

election, as the electorate is deprived of any option to reject the sole candidate. This raises a legal paradox as Section 53(2) of RPA, 1951 recognizes a "win by default" even if voters would have rejected the candidate had they been given the chance. Such a scenario is inherently inconsistent with the spirit of free electoral choice and the growing jurisprudence on voter autonomy.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is empowered by Constitution to ensure free and fair elections.¹⁵ In practice, however, the ECI has rarely intervened in unopposed elections, even where procedural fairness is questioned. In the 2024 Surat Lok Sabha seat, opposition candidates were disqualified on technical grounds, leaving the single remaining candidate unchallenged after withdrawal by various other candidates. While the action may have complied with RPA provisions, the ECI did not investigate potential abuse or collusion, despite public criticism. Article 324 grants sufficient residual powers to the ECI to call for independent inquiries along with the power to delay declaration of uncontested wins where fairness is suspect.

Internationally, India is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees genuine periodic elections as well as guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors.¹⁶ The UN Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment No. 25, have interpreted this to mean elections must offer real choices. Frequent or strategic unopposed victories may raise concerns under India's international commitments to electoral democracy.

CAUSES OF UNOPPOSED ELECTIONS IN INDIA

A democratic election is not merely the formal act of polling but the embodiment of genuine political competition, active voter participation, and candidate autonomy. The causes behind unopposed victories are complex, often resulting from a combination of legal & structural loopholes in the electoral framework and deep-seated political dynamics, especially at the grassroots level.

¹⁵ Constitution of India, 1950, Art. 324

¹⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Art. 25(b)

In many states and constituencies, unopposed elections are the result of political hegemony exercised by a single party or candidate, often facilitated by a well organised cadre network, access to financial resources, and strong local influence. This is particularly visible in Panchayat and municipal elections, where local political monopolies function as gatekeepers. The dominance of a single party can often dissuade potential candidates, create asymmetric contest conditions, and eventually eliminate opposition visibility, resulting in systematic disincentivisation of electoral competition.

Coercive tactics, ranging from direct threats to social pressure, are well-documented causes of unopposed elections. Especially in rural and semi-urban India, fear of violence, harassment, or economic retaliation can prevent candidates from filing nominations or compel them to withdraw. In zones where there is significant presence of Naxal elements, coercion often operates through invisible but effective social mechanisms, which are difficult to document but well understood by voters and political observers. An example of how breakdown in public order leads to uncontested electoral victories can be found in Manipur's post-conflict local body elections in 2024. Following months of ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki communities, several municipal and district-level constituencies in Churachandpur and Bishnupur districts witnessed uncontested victories or total vacancies. Many candidates from minority communities withdrew, citing fear of violence and lack of protection. The State Election Commission, despite requests for special security measures, was unable to guarantee safe campaigning. This created a vacuum where the dominant group's nominees ran unopposed, raising grave concerns about equal political participation and minority rights.¹⁷

Not all uncontested elections are involuntary. In many cases, opposition parties strategically withdraw their candidates for alliances, seat-sharing deals, or in protest. While these withdrawals are technically legal, they hollow out electoral contestation and reduce elections to mere formalities. As discussed previously about the situation in the 2024 Surat Lok Sabha seat wherein opposition candidates were disqualified on technical grounds, and no other party fielded a replacement, allowing the single remaining candidate to win uncontested. Though there was no official alliance, informal coordination or political fatigue among smaller parties can be the reason for such outcome. Such strategies may serve short-term political interests but

¹⁷ Pheroze L. Vincent, Manipur Local Polls See Uncontested Wins Amid Ethnic Strife, *The Telegraph* (Feb. 5, 2024), available at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/manipur-local-polls-unopposed-wins-violence/cid/1979232>.

undermine long-term democratic engagement, particularly for voters who lose their right to choose.

Additionally, there are glaring systemic flaws in India's nomination, scrutiny, and withdrawal processes that allow for unopposed victories. There is no inquiry mechanism in place to scrutinize suspicious mass withdrawals in any election. There are certain provisions for arbitrary rejection of nomination papers by Returning Officers under the RPA, 1951.¹⁸ It must also be noted that there is lack of proper appeal timeline when nominations are rejected close to the last date. In *N.P. Ponnuswami v. Returning Officer*¹⁹, the Court emphasized the sanctity of nomination and scrutiny processes, noting that election fairness starts at the point of candidature. However, the administrative machinery has not evolved to handle modern electoral manipulation, particularly when entire opposition benches are eliminated through flawed scrutiny.

A silent but powerful cause of uncontested elections is voter disillusionment. Where electoral outcomes are seen as pre-decided, or when voters lack faith in institutions, the lack of community support discourages potential candidates. Particularly in rural or tribal constituencies, where state presence is minimal, the cost of contesting an election is financially and socially very high. This leads to no opposition candidates stepping forward, even where space exists politically. The 2010 Nagaland municipal elections witnessed widespread boycotts and uncontested wins due to customary tribal opposition to women's reservation in civic polls which reflects a unique intersection of cultural resistance and political apathy.²⁰ Additionally, inadequate political education, low media penetration, and persistent gender and caste-based exclusion further undermine democratic participation. These factors, when left unaddressed, create a self-perpetuating cycle of uncontested political dominance, jeopardising the democratic promise of equal opportunity and electoral accountability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFORMS

The increasing instances of unopposed elections culminating in even Lok Sabha constituencies such as Surat in 2024 demand urgent electoral, institutional, and societal reforms. Although

¹⁸ Representations of People Act, 1951, S. 36.

¹⁹ AIR 1952 SC 64

²⁰ Jelle J. P. Wouters, "Nagas as a "Society against Voting?": Consensus-Building, Party-Less Politics and a Culturalist Critique of Elections in Northeast India", *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, pg. 113, 2018.

unopposed elections are legally valid under the current provisions of Representation of People Act, 1951, its democratic legitimacy remains of deep concern. As elections form the backbone of representative governance in India, the lack of properly conducted elections undermines the core Constitutional values and further erode public trust from the system, paving the way for political monopolisation. Addressing these concerns is not possible without a multifaceted approach. This section puts forth a reform agenda spanning three critical dimensions: strengthening the electoral legal framework, enhancement of institutional safeguards and fostering democratic political culture grounded in electoral fairness.

1. Mandatory Minimum Vote Threshold for Unopposed Candidates

The absence of candidates contesting the elections as opponents should not be construed as the presence of popular mandate. A potential reform to address this democratic gap is to require a minimum percentage of eligible votes, even for unopposed candidates, for their election to be deemed valid. Such a provision would ensure that public endorsement will remain central to electoral legitimacy, and the absence of challengers in the election does not translate into automatic victory. By requiring a minimum percentage of valid votes or a specific affirmative vote count even in unopposed contests, the law would re-centre the voter's role in the electoral process. Such a mechanism ensures that voter participation remains essential, even when competition is absent.

Introducing a NOTA-style validation, where an unopposed candidate must obtain votes from at least 15% to 20% of the electorate, could ensure that even single-candidate elections maintain voter accountability. This step however will require an amendment to the Section 53(2) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 by introducing a clause requiring a minimum approval threshold (e.g., 15% of registered voters) for unopposed candidates to be declared elected without declaring the results before going to poll when there are no more than one candidate contesting elections. Importantly, this model would allow NOTA (None of the Above) to function as a de facto candidate in unopposed elections, such that if the unopposed candidate fails to secure more votes than NOTA, the election stands annulled and fresh nominations are invited, and additionally barring the candidate who failed to secure more votes than NOTA from contesting the subsequent elections. This approach has been discussed earlier during the local body elections in Maharashtra, where NOTA captured significant dissent,

signalling a need for its institutional recognition.²¹ The Law Commission of India, in its 255th Report on Electoral Reforms (2015), rejected the idea of invalidating an election where a majority of voters opt for NOTA. This position demonstrates that while the idea of strengthening NOTA has been contemplated at high policy levels, it is yet to find concrete acceptance. Nonetheless, the Commission's acknowledgment that the issue could be reconsidered leaves room for progressive legal reform, particularly in cases where uncontested elections threaten democratic choice and legitimacy.²²

Opponents may argue that conducting a full-scale election in such cases is fiscally wasteful; however, democratic legitimacy cannot be sacrificed at the altar of administrative efficiency. Every citizen deserves the opportunity to affirm or reject their representative, even in the absence of alternatives. While the right to vote in India has traditionally been classified as a statutory right under the RPA²³, judicial pronouncements have increasingly acknowledged its close nexus with fundamental rights. The Supreme Court judgement in *People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) v. Union of India*²⁴, which upheld the inclusion of the NOTA (None of the Above) option in Electronic Voting Machines, highlighted that the right to reject all candidates was protected under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution as an expression of individual opinion. The Court observed that the freedom to cast a vote for "none of the above" is an essential part of a voter's right to freedom of speech and expression, stating that democracy thrives on voter choice, including the right to dissent. While voting itself may be statutory, the act of making an informed choice or choosing not to support any candidate is a manifestation of fundamental constitutional freedoms. In this light, any legal or electoral framework that forecloses the opportunity to vote simply because there is only one candidate in the fray amounts to a denial of electoral expression. The lack of contest cannot be used as a justification to disenfranchise voters. On the contrary, when no alternative candidate is available, the right to vote becomes even more essential, as citizens must still be given an avenue to register their approval or rejection of the sole nominee. The democratic process does not merely involve electing representatives but it also affirms the sovereign role of the people as participants in governance. Therefore, denying elections due to a lack of competing candidates undermines

²¹ HT News Desk, "Maharashtra May Hold Re-Election in Local Polls Where NOTA Got Most Votes", *Hindustan Times*, 2018, available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/maharashtra-may-hold-re-election-in-local-polls-where-nota-got-maximum-votes/story-dQfS4mFiWrvFbiorAfVhxN.html> (last visited May 9, 2025).

²² Law Commission of India, Report No. 255, Electoral Reforms 4.3.5, pg. 194 (Mar. 2015), <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/reports/Report255.pdf>.

²³ Representation of the People Act, 195, s. 62.

²⁴ *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India*, (2013) 10 S.C.C. 1.

both statutory rights and fundamental constitutional principles that protect political expression and citizen participation.

2. Reopening Nominations in Case of Mass Withdrawals

Where multiple candidates withdraw suddenly especially under suspicious circumstances, it raises red flags of political coercion or manipulation. In such cases, a mechanism should exist to reopen nominations, either through suo motu powers of the Election Commission of India (ECI) or through a judicial review process. This would prevent the abuse of the nomination process as a tool for exclusion and ensure that voters are not deprived of choice due to procedural exploitation. Introducing a new provision in the RPA or ECI regulations that mandates reopening nominations if more than one valid candidate is disqualified or withdraws after scrutiny especially if the remaining contest falls below a pre-set minimum (e.g., fewer than two candidates) can be helpful step to ensure that there is no instance for only a single candidate which remains in fray for election in case there is mass withdrawals and other candidates may put up their candidature to ensure the polling takes place.

3. Ensuring Robust Opposition Participation

While it is impossible to legally mandate political participation, certain structural incentives could be introduced. These may include state funding for contesting parties based on number of seats contested not just won, electoral performance-linked incentives such as access to electoral rolls, symbols, and airtime and provision for penalties in case of strategic withdrawals when they are shown to be coordinated with dominant party interests.

Smaller parties often avoid contesting in strongholds of dominant parties due to lack of resources or fear of violence. Institutionalizing a “fair contest” standard where the absence of opposition triggers ECI scrutiny can strengthen multi-party democracy, which is part of the basic structure of the Constitution as provided under *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* judgement.²⁵

²⁵ Supra note. 11

4. Reforms by State Election Commissions (SECs)

Unopposed elections are far more common in panchayat and municipal polls, governed by State Election Commissions according to the Constitutional provisions.²⁶ In many states, as seen in the preceding sections of this research paper, local elections have witnessed numerous seats being won unopposed, often under intimidation, backdoor deals, or engineered consensus. To counter this, SECs should try to develop state-level safeguards, such as Candidate protection mechanisms for vulnerable candidates (SC/ST/OBC/women). It can also take steps to mandate pre-contest mediation to prevent forced withdrawals. In *Bharatiya Janata Party v. State of West Bengal*²⁷, the Calcutta High Court has criticized the “chilling effect” created by state inaction during mass uncontested panchayat victories, calling for stricter SEC vigilance. Hence, SEC reforms are not only the needed due to the ongoing situations, but are directed by the judicial authorities in India.

5. Political Education and Awareness

A constitutional democracy cannot be sustained only by legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms. It must also be animated by an informed and politically conscious citizenry. The prevalence of unopposed elections which is often seen in local bodies and occasionally in legislative contests is not merely a procedural irregularity but symptomatic of a deeper malaise and a lack of awareness about electoral rights. The lack of opposition candidates in elections may frequently result from systemic indifference, sociocultural forces like caste-based consensus or patriarchal antipathy to female candidates, or perhaps even ill-informed withdrawal decisions rather than true consensus. Addressing this issue requires more than administrative oversight which demands a robust programme of civic and political education. There is also the growing need for state backed political literacy initiatives. To help implement these initiatives, collaborative efforts from educational institutions, civil society organisations and NGOs can be of greater help. These initiatives will help sensitise citizens to the fundamental principles of electoral democracy. While the Election Commission of India has already initiated steps in this direction through platforms such as the National Voters’ Services Portal (NVSP) and the Systematic Voters’ Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme, their scope can be meaningfully expanded.

²⁶ Constitution of India, 1950, arts. 243K, 243KZ

²⁷ [2018] 6 S.C.R. 693

Raising awareness about how unopposed elections can be harmful to the democracy of the nation as well as an indirect restriction of the fundamental right of rejecting the candidates by way of NOTA can also help in tackling the issue. Particular emphasis can be placed on candidate rights, and the importance of electoral plurality especially in rural and socio-economically marginalised regions where such occurrences of unopposed elections are of regular. A well-informed electorate is the strongest safeguard against democratic erosion, and sustained political education is a prerequisite to ensuring that elections remain competitive, representative, and genuinely reflective of public will.

6. Strengthening the Role of Media and Civil Society

A free and independent media plays a key role in exposing engineered unopposed elections, especially where coercion or administrative manipulation is involved. The Surat 2024 case, for instance, saw widespread coverage questioning the validity of the nomination process. Civil society organizations (CSOs) like Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), Common Cause, and PRS Legislative Research have consistently advocated for greater transparency in the electoral process. These organizations must be institutionally supported and their recommendations incorporated into electoral guidelines.

7. Judicial Oversight and Quick Electoral Remedies

Although the Constitution bars courts from interfering in elections once the process has begun, courts can still play a pre-emptive and advisory role before the publication of election notifications or after the result declaration.²⁸ Fast-track benches for election-related grievances concerning mass withdrawals, nomination irregularities, or candidate intimidation can act as a deterrent against procedural abuse. The Law Commission of India, in its report on electoral reforms, emphasized the need for judicial mechanisms that balance finality and fairness in election law.²⁹ The possibility of establishing designated Election Tribunals in high courts with time-bound mandates to hear pre-election nomination disputes and post-election validation of unopposed victories can solidify the election process although it must also have to be ensured that there is no judicial overreach and interference in the election process.

²⁸ Constitution of India, 1950, art. 329(b)

²⁹ Law Commission of India, “255th Report on Report on Electoral Reforms” (March, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Unopposed elections in India, while not a widespread phenomenon at the national level, have become a cause for concern, particularly at local levels such as panchayats and municipal bodies. The phenomenon of candidates winning unopposed is indicative of systemic issues that extend beyond just the absence of competition in elections as it highlights the broader challenges facing Indian democracy. These issues range from political monopolies, coercive practices, and flawed electoral processes to voter disillusionment and lack of political engagement. At the national level, the occurrence of unopposed elections, such as the 2024 Surat Lok Sabha seat, has raised eyebrows, although the instances remain limited. While not yet a significant crisis in parliamentary elections, it is a trend that cannot be ignored. Unopposed victories are not only reflective of the dominant political party's strategic positioning but also the weaknesses in India's electoral framework that enable such outcomes. The lack of robust safeguards, particularly in nomination processes and the scrutiny of candidate withdrawals, means that these elections may not always reflect the true democratic will of the people. This paper has demonstrated that the causes of unopposed elections are varied which range from political coercion, administrative manipulation, and flawed scrutiny processes to strategic withdrawals and socio-cultural exclusion.

The proposed reforms in this paper address both structural and normative deficits. Requiring a minimum vote threshold for unopposed candidates can restore the voter's role even in a non-competitive election. Mechanisms to reopen nominations in cases of mass withdrawals can act as deterrents against forced consensus or intimidation. Incentivising broader participation of smaller political parties, ensuring safety and transparency during the nomination process, and investing in civic education are necessary long-term interventions. Equally, the role of civil societies and the media as democratic watchdogs becomes very important. These institutions are capable of identifying and exposing various practices which are un-democratic and may escape the scanner of those in charge of keeping a vigil. While judiciary operates within the boundaries set by the Constitution, it also retains the power to provide meaningful redressal in exceptional cases as and when required provided that its interventions are guided by restraint and firm commitment to the Constitutional principles.

Electoral democracy is not just a matter of laws and procedures but it lives through the people who participate in it. When elections are concluded without proper contest or elections, it weakens the spirit of engagement and participation. Protecting the health of electoral procedure

is not the duty for just the lawmakers alone but it also largely depends on political parties, voters, and civil society rightfully playing their part. Going forward, any reform which may be introduced to tackle the issue of unopposed elections must stay true to the Constitution's core values of liberty, equality, participation, and justice. By upholding these principles, India has the chance to strengthen trust in the democratic process and make sure that the elections continue to reflect the true voice of the people not just in their outward form, but in democratic spirit.