

## FROM BALLOTS TO BULLETS: UNDERSTANDING THE CRIMINAL – POLITICAL NEXUS IN INDIAN ELECTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*The growing consolidation of Criminals within Indian political system poses serious challenges to the legitimacy of democracy and the quality of governance. Despite constitutional safeguards and a well-established electoral framework, a large number of legislators at both state and central levels continue to face serious criminal charges, including corruption, rape, murder and kidnapping etc. This paper explores the origins, causes, consequences of the criminalization of politics in India. Relying on Secondary Data, from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the Election Commission of India (ECI), and some relevant judicial precedents, it employs qualitative analysis to understand why candidates with criminal backgrounds succeed in the politics. The findings reveal that weak judicial mechanisms, intuition loopholes, identity-based voting, and the dominance of money and muscle power sustain this trade. Such practices undermine the rule of law, distort governance priorities, and weaken public trust in the democratic institutions. Although mandatory disclosures and judicial interventions have increased electoral transparency, they remain insufficient to address the root causes. This paper argues for comprehensive reforms including stronger disqualification laws, greater political party accountability, and increased voter awareness to safeguard India's democracy.*

**Keywords:** *Criminalization in politics, Electoral behavior, Political institutions, Governance, Electoral reforms.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

India is the world's largest democracy and has witnessed remarkable political participation since independence. However, a dark reality of Indian democracy is the growing involvement of criminals in politics and the deepening nexus between crime and political power. The criminalization of politics is not merely a legal issue or a matter of weak governance and declining public trust—it is also a social,

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cultural, and institutional challenge that threatens the very foundations of constitutional democracy.

### 1.1 Meaning of Criminalization in Politics

Criminalization in politics refers to the situation where any individual with a criminal background contests elections and gets elected as members of legislative bodies, both at the Central and State levels.<sup>1</sup>

India is the largest democratic country in the world. It must ensure that elections are truly free and fair so that the best leaders can emerge. Democracy should always be based on the will of the people, but it must also respect the Rule of Law. Unfortunately, money and muscle power often influence voters, reducing their real choice. It is also important to make sure that criminals have no place in the India's politics. Therefore, it is essential to combat the Criminalization of Politics.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 Historical background of Criminalization in Politics

After Independence, Indian politics was largely led by great leaders and freedom fighters. However, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, political parties began to rely on local strongmen and the use of muscle power. These influential figures were initially employed to mobilize and influence voters, and even to capture polling booths. According to data from the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the number of candidates with criminal backgrounds has been rising since 2004.

- In the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, 24% of members had declared criminal cases.<sup>3</sup>
- In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, this figure increased to 34%.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shashi Nath Mondal (ed.), *Indian Constitutional Law: The Contemporary Challenges* 373 (Red'Shine Publication, London, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> All you need to know about Crminalization of Politics, *available at:* [https://blog.ipleaders.in/all-you-need-to-know-about-criminalization-of-politics/#Impact\\_of\\_criminalization\\_of\\_politics](https://blog.ipleaders.in/all-you-need-to-know-about-criminalization-of-politics/#Impact_of_criminalization_of_politics) (last visited on September 20, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Drishti IAS, "Criminalisation of Politics," *available at:* <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/criminalisation-of-politics-6> (last visited on Sept. 20, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Testbook, "The Criminalisation of Politics: Meaning, Causes & Legal Aspects," *available at:* <https://testbook.com/ias-preparation/criminalisation-of-politics> (last visited on Sept. 20, 2025).

- In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, 43% of members had declared criminal cases, with about 21% facing serious charges such as rape, murder, kidnapping, and crimes against women.<sup>5</sup>
- In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, ADR again reported that 43% of members had declared criminal cases.<sup>6</sup>

Over time, criminals who once worked behind the scenes have themselves become lawmakers. This trend poses a serious challenge to Indian democracy. It raises deep concerns about the integrity of political institutions and the erosion of Public Trust. When individuals with Criminal backgrounds hold legislative power, it undermines the rule of law and weakens democratic accountability and transparency. Strengthening electoral reforms, enforcing stricter laws on candidate eligibility, and increasing voter awareness are crucial steps towards combating this growing nexus between Crime and Politics.

### 1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the origins and historical development of the criminal–political nexus in India.
2. To analyze the factors that enable candidates with criminal backgrounds to achieve electoral success.
3. To assess the consequences of criminalization of politics on governance, rule of law, and democratic legitimacy.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing reforms, such as mandatory disclosures and judicial interventions.
5. To propose policy suggestions and reforms aimed at reducing criminalization in Indian politics and strengthening democratic institutions.
6. To evaluate the impact of the criminal-political nexus on the quality of governance and public trust in democratic systems.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study relies on a qualitative research design, drawing upon secondary data sources. Reports published by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), data from the Election Commission of India (ECI), and relevant judicial pronouncements form the primary evidence base. Scholarly articles, books, and media reports have also been used to supplement this analysis. The method applied

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<sup>5</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Supra* note 5.

is content analysis, aimed at identifying recurring patterns, causes, and implications of the criminalization of politics in India.

### 3. Patterns of Criminalization in Indian electoral Politics (Data Analysis)

The Criminal –Political Nexus in India has become a regular feature of its electoral democracy. Data are collected from the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Association of Reforms (ADR) show that a large number of candidates who are consisting in the elections have declared Criminal cases in their affidavits. Over the past two decades, there has been a sustained increased in the both in number of such candidates and their chances of winning elections. This trend is evident across both parliamentary and State assembly elections, with significant proportion of winning candidates having declared criminal cases, including serious charges such as murder, rape and corruption.

#### 3.1 Winning candidates with Declared Criminal Cases

Serial No.	Election Year	Number of Elected Members	Number of MPs with Declared Criminal Cases	Percentage
1.	2009	543	162	30%
2.	2014	542	185	34%
3.	2019	539	233	43%
4.	2024	543	251	46%

Table 1: MPs/Winning candidates with Declared Criminal Cases: 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024

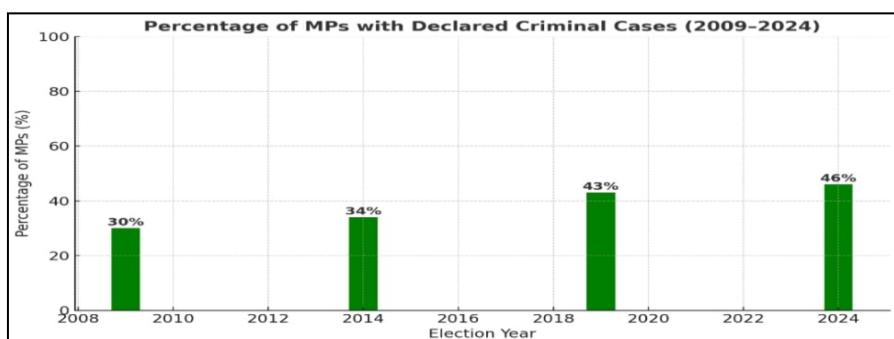


Figure 1: MPs/Winning candidates with Declared Criminal Cases: 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024

Out of the 543 winning candidates analyzed in Lok Sabha 2024, 251 (46%) winning candidates have declared criminal cases against themselves. Out of 539 MPs analysed during Lok Sabha elections in 2019, 233(43%) MPs had declared criminal cases against themselves. Out of 542 MPs analyzed during Lok Sabha elections in 2014, 185(34%) MPs had declared criminal cases against themselves. Out of 543 MPs analyzed during Lok Sabha elections in 2009, 162(30%) MPs had declared criminal cases against themselves. There is an increase of 55% in the number of MPs with declared criminal cases since 2009.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2 Winning candidates with Serious Criminal Cases:

Serial No.	Election Year	Number of Elected Members	Number of MPs/Winning candidates with Declared Serious Criminal Cases	Percentage
1.	2009	543	76	14%
2.	2014	542	112	21%
3.	2019	539	159	29%
4.	2024	543	170	31%

Table 2: MPs/Winning candidates with Serious Criminal Cases: 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024

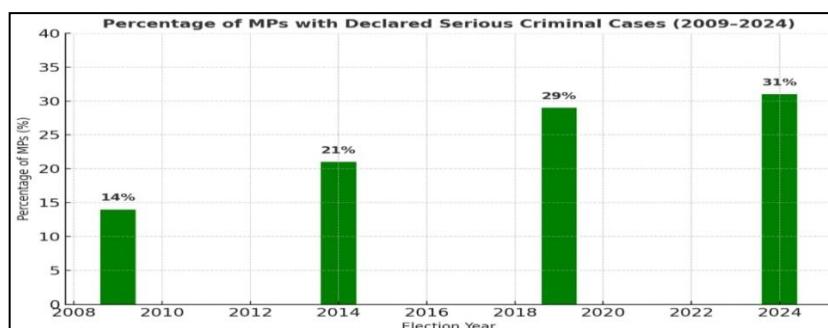


Figure 2: MPs/Winning candidates with Serious Criminal Cases: 2009, 2014, 2019 and 2024

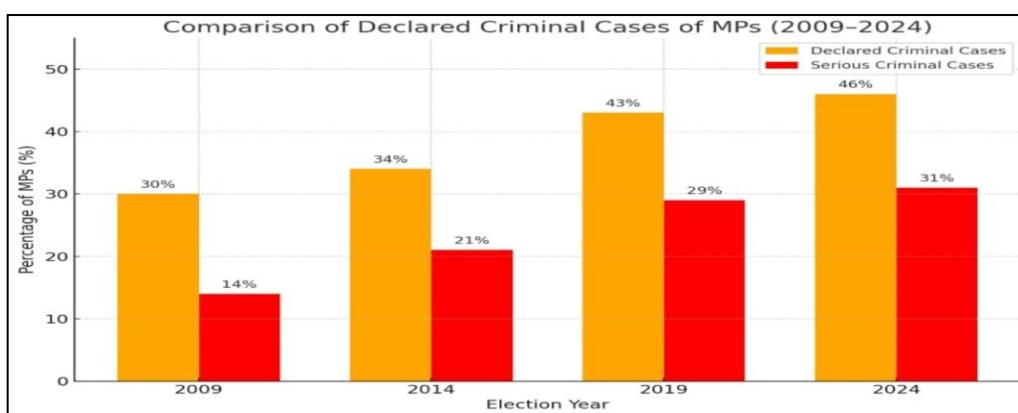
<sup>7</sup> Association for Democratic Reforms, “Lok Sabha Elections 2024, Analysis of Criminal Background, Financial, Education, Gender and other details of Winning candidates” 6, available at: [https://adrindia.org/sites/default/files/Lok\\_Sabha\\_Elections\\_2024\\_Criminal\\_and\\_Financial\\_background\\_details\\_of\\_Winning\\_Candidates\\_Finalver\\_English%20%281%29.pdf](https://adrindia.org/sites/default/files/Lok_Sabha_Elections_2024_Criminal_and_Financial_background_details_of_Winning_Candidates_Finalver_English%20%281%29.pdf) (last visited on Oct. 2, 2025).

This data clearly indicates a steady increase in the number and proportion of MPs with criminal cases over the past 15 years. The rise from 30% in 2009 to 46% in 2024 reflects a growing acceptance of candidates with criminal backgrounds within both political parties and the electorate.

170 (31%) winning candidates in Lok Sabha 2024 Elections have declared serious criminal cases including cases related to rape, murder, attempt to murder, kidnapping, crimes against women etc. Out of 539 MPs analyzed during Lok Sabha elections in 2019, 159(29%) MPs had declared serious criminal cases against themselves. Out of 542 MPs analyzed during Lok Sabha elections in 2014, 112(21%) MPs had declared serious criminal cases against themselves. Out of 543 MPs analyzed during Lok Sabha elections in 2009, 76(14%) MPs had declared serious criminal cases against themselves. There is an increase of 124% in the number of MPs with declared serious criminal cases since 2009.<sup>8</sup>

The data indicates rise in the proportion of MPs facing serious criminal charges, from 14% in 2009 to 31% in 2024 – a 124% increase over 15 years. This sharp upward trend highlights not just the growing prevalence of criminalization in politics, but also the serious natures of the offenses involved, which include violent crimes such as murder, kidnapping, sexual assault, rape and crime against women.

### 3.3 Comparisons of declared criminal cases of mps of 2009, 2014, 2019 and winning candidates 2024



**Figure 3: Comparison of declared criminal cases of MPs of 2009, 2014, 2019 and winning candidates 2024**

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

This figure reveals the serious nature and diversity of criminal offences among winning candidates, reflecting not only violent crimes but also offences targeting social cohesion, such as hate speech.

- 27 winning candidates have declared convicted cases against themselves.
- 4 winning candidates have declared cases related to murder.
- 27 winning candidates have declared cases of attempted murder.
- 15 winning candidates have declared cases related to crimes against women. Out of 15 winning candidates, 2 winning candidates have declared charges related to rape.
- 4 winning candidates have declared cases related to kidnapping.
- 43 winning candidates have declared cases related to hate speech.

The chances of winning for a candidate with declared criminal cases in the Lok Sabha 2024 are 15.3% whereas for a candidate with clean background, it is 4.4%.<sup>9</sup>

This trend shows a concerning pattern in Indian elections, where candidates with criminal background often have more money resources, local influences and support from political parties, which makes them more likely to win despite legal and ethical issues.

#### **4. Decoding the Criminal – Political Nexus: Causes and Consequences (Argument and Discussion)**

The Nexus between crime and politics in India is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by structural, social, and institutional factors. Understanding both its causes and consequences is essential to evaluate its impact on democracy and governance. This Nexus not only undermines the integrity of political institutions but also weakens public trust, fosters corruption, and distorts policy priorities, ultimately affecting the quality of governance and the functioning of democracy.

##### **4.1 Causes of criminalization in politics**

###### **1. Crime–Money–Politics Nexus**

Many politicians in India maintain close ties with criminals to secure manpower, muscle power, or financial resources. Such alliances help them influence voters, control constituencies, and win elections. These connections give candidates

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<sup>9</sup> National Election Watch, “Analysis of Criminal and Financial Background of Candidates,” available at: [https://groups.google.com/g/national-election-watch/c/Ngg1Yzd\\_9kI](https://groups.google.com/g/national-election-watch/c/Ngg1Yzd_9kI) (last visited on Oct. 2, 2025).

electoral advantages, allowing them to dominate campaigns and intimidate opponents.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Weak Law Enforcement and Judicial System

The Indian judicial system is slow, overburdened, and often inefficient in prosecuting criminal cases. Weak laws and delays in trials allow candidates with serious criminal charges to contest elections without restriction. As a result of which the candidates with pending criminal cases face little risk of disqualification, encouraging more such individuals to enter politics.<sup>11</sup>

## 3. Voter Awareness Gaps

Illiteracy, poverty, and lack of awareness among voters often lead to poor voting choices. In many cases, voters prioritize caste, religion, or short-term benefits over a candidate's criminal record. This enables candidates with criminal backgrounds to gain support despite ethical or legal concerns. Many voters lack information about clean politics and may vote based on emotions or short term benefits, which helps corrupt leaders stay in power.<sup>12</sup>

## 4. Caste and Identity Politics

Political parties and candidates exploit caste and religious identities to secure support, which sometimes overshadows concerns about criminal backgrounds. This reinforces the social legitimacy of criminal-politicians. This practice gives social legitimacy to criminal-politics and strengthens their voter base. This means that voters often support candidates from their own caste or religion, even if those candidates have criminal records. Such behavior makes it easier for criminal politicians to gain respect and power in society.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Political Party Complicity

Political parties often hesitate to reform the system, as they benefit from it. Prioritizing "winnability," parties frequently nominate candidates with criminal backgrounds because they bring money, influence, and vote banks. This also encourages the continuation of the criminal-politics nexus and undermines electoral ethics. This shows that political parties often choose to ignore criminal

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<sup>10</sup> *Supra* note 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> StudyIQ, "Criminalization of Politics, Causes, Effects and Consequences," available at: <https://www.studyiq.com/articles/criminalisation-of-politics/> (last visited on Sept. 20, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> *Supra* note 10.

behavior if it helps them win elections. They focus more on success than on honesty or good governance. As a result, corruption and crime continue to grow within the political system.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. High Cost of Elections

Elections in India demand enormous financial resources. Criminal candidates, with access to unaccounted wealth, can easily finance their campaigns and gain favor with political parties. Their financial strength allows them to outspend rivals and secure both party support and voter attention. Elections are very expansion, so rich candidates have an advantages over honest but poor ones.<sup>15</sup>

## 7. Electoral Competition

In highly competitive constituencies, candidates with money and muscle power are often perceived as more capable of securing victory, especially in close contests. This belief leads parties and voters to support candidates with criminal backgrounds, which further perpetuates the cycle.

## 8. Weak State Capacity and Governance Gaps

In areas with poor governance and weak state presence, voters often depend on local “Strongmen” for protection, dispute settlement, and quick solutions, which encourages the rise of criminal-politicians. This dependence increases the power of criminal candidates and makes them essential for winning elections.

### 4.2 Consequences of criminalization in politics

#### 1. Erosion of Public Trust

The criminalization of politics weakens citizens’ faith in democratic institutions. When individuals with serious criminal charges are elected, voters begin to doubt the integrity of the political process and the legitimacy of governance. This leads to cynicism among voters and decreased participation in democratic processes. This in turn, can weaken the overall functioning of democracy<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Supra* note 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Supra* note 10.

## 2. Erosion of Rule of Law

When legislators themselves face criminal charges, it directly undermines the principle of equality before the law. This creates a contradiction where law-makers also become law-breakers, weakening constitutional values and eroding public confidence in the justice system. Such situations make it harder for ordinary citizens to respect and follow the law. It also encourages a culture where criminal behavior in politics is tolerated.<sup>17</sup>

## 3. Corruption and Black Money

The entry of criminals into politics increases corruption, as political power is often used to protect illicit businesses and generate black money. This undermines transparency in governance. It also diverts public resources away from development and welfare programs. Over time, this erodes public trust and weakens the effectiveness of government institutions.<sup>18</sup>

## 4. Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy

The presence of criminal-politicians creates a moral and institutional crisis, where governance is viewed as serving private or criminal interests rather than the public good. This reduces the legitimacy of democracy itself. This situation erodes citizens' trust in elected representatives and discourages active participation in democratic processes. It also makes people doubt whether the government really works for them.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Weakening Institutions

Institutions such as the police, bureaucracy, and judiciary are pressured or manipulated by criminal-politicians, reducing their independence and effectiveness. This undermines their ability to enforce laws fairly and weakens checks and balances within the government. It can lead to biased decision-making, reduced accountability, and a slower response to public grievances. Over time, this diminishes the credibility and authority of key democratic institutions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> PMF IAS, "Criminalisation Of Politics: Key Drivers & Impacts," available at: <https://www.pmfias.com/criminalisation-of-politics/> (last visited on Sept. 20, 2025).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Supra* note 10.

## 6. Impact on election

Criminalization in politics affects elections by reducing fair choices for voters, increasing the use of money and muscle power, and causing violence or pressure on voters. It makes elections less fair and weakens people's trust in democracy. Ultimately, this erodes the very foundation of democratic governance. It also discourages honest candidates from contesting, further limiting voters' options and accountability in the political system.<sup>21</sup>

### 4.3 SOME LANDMARK JUDICIAL CASES AGAINST CRIMINALIZATION IN POLITICS

The judiciary, as the guardian of the Constitution, has played a crucial role in curbing the criminalization of politics in India. While the legislature has often been reluctant to enact stringent reforms against its own members, the Supreme Court and High Courts have stepped in to uphold the principles of free and fair elections. Through landmark judgments, the judiciary has strengthened transparency, accountability, the integrity of the electoral process and the principle that individuals with serious criminal backgrounds should not hold public office. The following cases highlight key judicial interventions aimed at protecting the integrity of the electoral process.

#### A. Union of India vs. Association for Democratic Reforms<sup>22</sup>

*In this case the Supreme Court has mandated that candidates must disclose their criminal records, assets, liabilities, and educational qualifications in their nomination papers. This empowers voters to make informed choices and prevents concealment of criminal backgrounds.*

#### B. Ramesh Dalal vs. Union of India (2005)<sup>23</sup>

*The Supreme Court held that if a sitting Member of Parliament or State Legislature is convicted and sentenced to imprisonment of two years or more, he/she stands immediately disqualified from the date of conviction, irrespective of whether an appeal is filed. This ruling clarified the scope of Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, ensuring that convicted representatives cannot continue to*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> 2002 (3) SCR 294.

<sup>23</sup> *Supra* note 2.

*hold office. It strengthened the Court's consistent stance that those guilty of serious crimes should not occupy law-making positions.*

**C. K. Prabhakarn vs. P. Jayarajan<sup>24</sup>**

*The Supreme Court, while interpreting provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, observed that the objective of election law is to maintain the purity of the democratic process. The Court stressed that “law-breakers should not be law-makers” and that candidates facing disqualification under the Act cannot be permitted to contest elections. This judgment reinforced the principle that democracy must be protected from criminal elements entering legislatures.*

**D. Lily Thomas vs. Union of India<sup>25</sup>**

*In this case the Supreme Court struck down Section 8(4) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which earlier allowed convicted MPs or MLAs to continue in office if they appealed within three months. The Court held that a legislator is immediately disqualified upon conviction for an offence with imprisonment of two years or more.*

**E. Public Interest Foundation vs. Union of India<sup>26</sup>**

*In this Case, the Supreme Court directed political parties to publish details of criminal cases of their candidates on official websites, newspapers, and social media. They must also explain reasons for selecting candidates with criminal backgrounds, especially when cleaner alternatives are available.*

**5. Key findings**

The analysis of political trends reveals a growing presence and influence of legislators with criminal backgrounds in India. The following points below highlight their impact on elections, governance, and democracy.

- i. The number of legislators with criminal backgrounds has increased since 2009. In 2024, 46% of MPs had declared criminal cases, with 31% facing serious charges.
- ii. Candidates with criminal records often have a higher chance of winning elections compared to candidates with clean backgrounds, largely due to money power, muscle power, and caste or religion based mobilization.

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<sup>24</sup> AIR 2005 SC 688.

<sup>25</sup> AIR 2013 SC 2662.

<sup>26</sup> (2019) 3 SCC 224.

- iii. Weak judicial systems, delayed trials, and the absence of strict disqualification laws allow individuals with pending cases to contest elections repeatedly.
- iv. Political parties prioritize “winnability” over ethics, regularly nominating candidates with criminal records because they bring financial resources and influence.
- v. The persistence of criminalization undermines the rule of law and public trust in democracy, weakens institutions, and distorts governance priorities.
- vi. Electoral violence and intimidation are often associated with criminal-politicians, reducing free and fair voter participation.
- vii. Legislators with criminal backgrounds are more likely to misuse public funds, which affects development projects and welfare programs.
- viii. The influence of criminal-politicians discourages honest candidates from entering politics, limiting ethical leadership.
- ix. Media and civil society often face challenges in holding criminal-politics accountable due to their power and influence.
- x. Long-term governance suffers as policies may prioritize private or criminal interests over public welfare.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

### 6.1 Conclusion

The study reveals that the criminalization of politics in India has become deeply threat to democratic legitimacy and governance. Despite judicial interventions and reforms such as mandatory disclosures, the number of elected representatives with criminal backgrounds continues to rise. The nexus between crime, money, muscle power and politics persists due to weak institutions, identity-driven politics, and voter complicity. Breaking this cycle requires a combination of legal reforms, institutional strengthening, political accountability and transparency, and active voter participation or awareness among the voters. Unless decisive steps are taken, India risks further erosion of democratic values and Constitutional provisions such as rule of law, equality before law and governance quality. Safeguarding democracy demands that ballots must decisively prevail over bullets. Ultimately, the resilience of Indian democracy depends on an informed electorate, ethical political leadership and a robust enforcement of laws that deter criminalization in politics.

### 6.2 Suggestion

#### 1. Legal Reforms – Disqualification at the stage of framing of charges

Currently, disqualification of candidates under the Representation of People's Act (RPA), 1951, occurs only after conviction. This loophole allows individuals with serious criminal cases to contest elections. Reforming the law to disqualify candidates once charges are formally framed by a competent court especially in heinous crimes like murder, rape, terrorism, corruption, or serious financial fraud would serve as a preventive measure. Safeguards such as independent judicial scrutiny could prevent misuse of politically motivated cases.

## **2. Judicial Reforms – Fast-track mechanisms for politicians' cases**

Criminal cases involving politicians often drag on for decades, allowing them to remain in power despite serious charges. Establishing special fast-track courts or dedicated benches to handle such cases would ensure time-bound disposal, ideally within a year. Technology-driven case management systems, additional judicial appointments,

and statutory timelines could further enhance speed and fairness. This reform would also strengthen public confidence in the justice system.

## **3. Party-Level Reforms – Accountability in candidate selection**

Political parties often nominate candidates with criminal records because of their money power, muscle power, or winnability factor. Mandating parties to publicly disclose the reasons for selecting such candidates, and why a cleaner alternative wasn't chosen, would create accountability and transparency. The Supreme Court has already directed disclosure of criminal cases of candidates, but stricter enforcement and penalties for non-compliance are needed. Internal party reforms, like ethical codes of conduct, can also push parties towards responsible behavior.

## **4. Strengthening Election Institutions – Empowering the ECI**

The Election Commission of India (ECI) plays a central role but is often limited by weak statutory powers. Reforms could include:

- Granting the ECI independent rule-making powers (like the SEBI or RBI).
- Strengthening its enforcement powers to de-register parties violating norms.
- Ensuring transparent appointments of Election Commissioners through a bipartisan selection committee.
- Providing the ECI with adequate financial and human resources for effective monitoring.

Such empowerment would help ensure free and fair elections beyond mere supervision.

#### **5. Awareness and Education – Civic literacy among voters**

Many voters either remain unaware of candidates' criminal backgrounds or prioritize short-term gains like freebies, caste or community affiliations, or local influence. Civic education programs, both in schools and through mass media, can encourage voters to demand cleaner governance. Civil society groups, NGOs, and the media can play a vital role in spreading awareness about the costs of electing tainted candidates. The introduction of voter report cards or awareness campaigns before elections could help shift the mindset. Increasing voter awareness can lead to more informed choices, reduce the electoral success of candidates with criminal backgrounds, and strengthen the overall accountability of elected.

#### **6. Campaign Finance Reforms – Reducing money power in elections**

Unregulated election expenditure fuels corruption and criminalization. Stricter monitoring of expenditure, use of digital payments, and transparent campaign funding are necessary. Exploring state funding of elections can reduce dependence on black money. Additionally, setting up independent mechanisms to audit political party accounts, introducing caps on donations, and banning anonymous contributions would help create a level playing field. These reforms would make elections fairer, reduced the influence of wealthy candidates, and strengthen public trust in the electoral process.

#### **7. Internal Democracy in Political Parties**

Most parties in India are controlled by a small elite or dynasties, limiting grassroots accountability. Reforms could mandate internal elections, transparent candidate selection processes, and greater representation for women, youth, and marginalized groups. A more Democratic Party structure can reduce dependence on “strongmen” with criminal clout. Improving internal democracy can encourage merit based leadership and ensure that parties are more accountable to their members and the public.

#### **8. Use of Technology and Transparency Tools**

Establish a centralized, publicly accessible database of all candidates' criminal, financial, and professional records. Expand the role of technology in monitoring campaign finance, tracking election expenditures, and verifying affidavits submitted by candidates. Use AI-driven monitoring for detecting hate speech,

misinformation, and illicit funding during campaigns. Wider adoption of technology can enhance transparency, empower voters with better information, and make enforcement of electoral laws more effective.

### **9. Stronger Punishments for Misrepresentation**

Many candidates misrepresent or conceal criminal records in their affidavits. Introducing strict penalties, including immediate disqualification, for false declarations can deter malpractice. Regular audits of affidavits by the Election Commission or an independent body should be mandated. Such measures would increase accountability, discourage dishonest candidates, and reinforce the integrity of the electoral process.

### **10. Whistleblower and Witness Protection Mechanisms**

Many cases against politicians collapse because witnesses are intimidated or bribed. Robust protection laws for whistleblowers and witnesses can ensure cases proceed without fear or coercion. Effective protection mechanisms would make it easier to prosecute criminal-politicians and strengthen public confidence in the justice system. Establishing Fast track Courts for cases involving politicians can further also encourage citizens and officials to report wrongdoing, which can deter criminal activities in politics, and improve overall governance.

### **11. Media and Election Code Strengthening**

Strict enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is needed to prevent misuse of state machinery, hate campaigns, or money distribution. Regulating paid news, strengthening fact-checking and penalizing misinformation during campaigns would improve the quality of electoral discourse. Strengthening media oversight and the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by the Election Commission of India would promote fair campaigns, reduce misinformation, and help voters make informed decisions.

### **12. Integrated Governance Measures**

Combining legal, judicial, institutional, political, and societal reforms ensures cleaner elections, great leadership, and stronger public trust in democracy. By addressing all aspects of the political system together such as laws, courts, parties, voters, and election institution institutions -this approach can break the cycle of criminalization, reduce corruption, and promote long term good governance.