

Is Indian Democracy Deepening or Declining? Public Opinion Insights From 75 Years of Democratic Experience

Dr. M. Bhaskara Raju

Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Govt. Degree College (Autonomous) Nagari, Chittoor
(Dist), AP, India

Abstract

India's democracy began with its constitutional inception in 1950 and has faced numerous challenges that continue to the present day, including those anticipated by Indian constitutional founders. Despite being the world's largest democracy, India has faced oscillations between democratic consolidation and institutional decay. The study traces key phases of evolution from the foundational years marked by universal adult franchise and parliamentary democracy to setbacks during the emergency (1975-77) and the strengthening of participatory democracy through regionalism, social justice movements, and decentralisation through Panchayati Raj and Urban Local Bodies. It analyses recent trends, including centralisation of power, institutional autonomy, shrinking civil liberties, increasing electoral dominance of the single largest party, etc. While watchdogs label India an "electoral autocracy," the resilience of civil society, judicial activism, and continued popular faith in elections indicate underlying democratic strength. The paper draws on public opinion surveys to understand whether India's democracy has deepened or declined in the view of the public. The study concludes that Indian democracy remains dynamic but requires reforms in transparency, internal party democracy and inclusive representation to preserve its foundational values.

Keywords: Indian Democracy, Civil Society, Inclusivity, Judicial Activism, Constitutional Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

India's democracy began with its independence in 1947 and the adoption of the Indian constitution in 1950. India is the largest democratic country in the world. Since its inception, it has completed 18 general elections for the mirror of opinions of the Indians (Lok Sabha). As the largest democracy, it held regular elections, maintained constitutional governance, and witnessed peaceful transfer of power even though the neighbouring countries slipped many times into military rule and autocratic rule. Yet, the journey of Indian democracy has been anything but linear. It has oscillated between deepening participation and institutional innovation on one hand and democratic backsliding and centralisation of power on the other. The success of Indian democracy depends on how various groups of the people, like women and marginalised sections participate, represent and exercise power in democracy. The study focuses on the evolution of Indian democracy and assesses the public opinion on Indian democracy. This research paper examines whether democracy in India has strengthened or declined over the last 75 years by assessing different parameters, key phases, institutional trends, societal changes, contemporary

challenges, and surveys.

2. Review Literature

- 2.1** Dr.Govind Behra, Scholar, Berhampur University, Titled- Declining of Democracy in India: Its Major Challenges in International Research Journal of Management and Sociology, Year 2022 elucidated that Despite poverty and social challenges, democracy in India has survived and deepened over seventy years. While institutions face decay due to apathy, corruption, and narrow interests, democracy remains vital. Its success depends on active, responsible citizenship, investment in reforms, and nurturing democratic values in India's diverse, traditional, and complex society.
- 2.2** Vineeta Yada, Titled "India in 2022: Deepening Democratic Decline", April, 2023 viewed that in 2022, India saw a strong economic recovery and an effective foreign policy handling, but democracy declined due to civil liberty setbacks and institutional erosion under BJP's growing political dominance.
- 2.3** Rahul Verma, Titled- 'The Exaggerated Death of Indian Democracy', Project, MUSE Mission, December, 2023 analysed that under BJP rule, India has shifted to a dominant-party system with centralized control, rising polarization, and contested democratic norms. Despite concerns, public satisfaction remains, demanding a new framework for analysis.
- 2.4** Ali, H.(2024) Crumbling Pillars, titled "Understanding Institutional Decay in Indian Democracy" in Journal of Development and Social Sciences, 5(2), 652-662. [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024\(5-II-S\)63](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024(5-II-S)63). It examined institutional decline in Indian democracy, highlighting threats like cronyism and rights violations. Using qualitative and theoretical approaches, it proposes reforms to enhance democratic resilience and governance.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the Indian democracy since it became a republic to the present
2. To trace out major achievements in Indian democracy
3. To evaluate democracy deepening or declining for 75 years of the Indian polity

4. Methodology

The study of research was carried out through both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been gathered from sample respondents using a structured, closed-ended Likert scale questionnaire specially designed and administered through Google Forms. Secondary data has been sourced from online websites, articles, journals, newspapers, and reference books.

5. Sampling

The erstwhile Chittoor district of the state of Andhra Pradesh was divided into two districts: Chittoor and Tirupati. These two districts were selected for the study due to proximity. From each district 25 samples were randomly collected through Google Forms. Thus the total sample consists of 50. However, care was taken to include the gender, education qualification, and all age groups.

5.1 The Early Years: Constitutional Foundations and Democratic Consolidation Period

India's democratic experiment began under adverse conditions: mass poverty (47%), illiteracy (18%), social hierarchies, and, communal divisions, etc. Yet, the first general elections in 1951-52 established a tradition of free and fair electoral competition. In the first general election, voter turnout was only

44.87%. The Indian constitution, described by Granville Austin as a “seamless web of rights and responsibilities”, laid the groundwork for a parliamentary democracy, secular polity, and federal structure.

Under Jawaharlal Nehru, India strengthened parliamentary procedures, nurtured institutions, and encouraged political participation. The judiciary asserted its independence in landmark cases like *A.K. Gopalan v. State of Madras* (1950) and *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), which laid down the Basic Structure Doctrine, limiting arbitrary amendments.

5.2 The Emergency: A Democratic Setback

The emergency from 25th June, 1975 to 21st March, 1977 was imposed by the then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi and marked a serious erosion of democratic values. Civil liberties were curtailed, opposition leaders were jailed, the press was vehemently censored, and constitutional amendments were rushed through the parliament. However, the electoral defeat of Smt. Indira Gandhi in the 1977 general elections and the return of democracy demonstrated the resilience of India’s democratic ethos. The 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1976, which centralised power was partially reversed by the 43rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1977 and 44th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1978, restoring civil liberties. According to the Rajni Kothari, “The Indian electorate refused to surrender their democratic rights even in the darkest hour.”

5.3 Deepening Democracy: The Rise of Regionalism and Social Justice

The 1980s and 1990s marked a phase of democratic deepening through the expansion of political participation. The recommendations of the Mandal Commission’s report implementation (1990) enhanced the representation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), reshaping the social basis of Indian politics. Christophe Jaffrelot called this the ‘Silent Revolution’, where lower castes asserted themselves electorally and ideologically. Simultaneously, regional parties gained ground, challenging the monopoly of the Congress Party and making Indian federalism more vibrant. Coalition governments at the centre during the 1990s promoted negotiation and power-sharing, strengthening pluralistic democracy.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) institutionalised Panchayati Raj and Urban Local Bodies, devolving power to grassroots levels and encouraging participatory democracy. These acts provided for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion of their population to the total population in the panchayat area. These acts provided for the reservation of not less than one-third of the total number of seats for women (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SCs and STs). Further, not less than one-third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. These acts also authorises the legislature of a state to make any provision for reservation of seats in any panchayat or offices of chairperson in the panchayat at any level in favour of backward classes (BCs).

5.4 The Civil Society and Media: Watchdogs of Democracy

The civil society and media are the watchdogs of democracy. Strengthening civil society strengthens democracy. In India, civil society is very strong to defend the rights of the people and to save democracy. It is a bridge between the government and the people. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) is a civil society organisation focussed on electoral and political reforms to improve governance, strengthen democracy, and promote transparency and accountability in politics. The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) is another civil society organisation strives for human rights and to provide legal aid to the needy people.

From the Right to Information Act, 2005, to anti-corruption movements like the India Against

Corruption movement(2011), civil society has played a vital role in making governance transparent and accountable. Now the Lokpal at the union level and Lokayuktas at state level are mandatory statutory bodies to inquire against corruption. The judiciary often stepped in through Public Interest Litigations (PILs) to protect rights and enforce accountability.

According to Edmund Burke “‘press’ is the fourth estate of democracy,” and another opinion prevailed as the media is the “fourth pillar of democracy”. It has been instrumental in exposing scams, educating the electorate, and amplifying marginalised voices. It is the voice of the voiceless people. However, the increasing corporatization of media and rise of disinformation pose fresh challenges.

5.5 Recent Trends: Democratic Decline or Institutional Stress?

While electoral democracy continues robustly, many scholars argue that India is experiencing democratic backsliding. Special reports from international watchdogs have raised concerns- Freedom House (2021) downgraded India to “Partly Free,” citing suppression of dissent, media intimidation, and religious intolerance. The V-Dem Institute (2021) classified India as an “electoral autocracy,” stating that democratic institutions are under pressure and oppositions’ voices are stifled. In addition to the above, erosion of institutional autonomy, like the weakening independence of the Election Commission, Central Bureau of Investigation(CBI), Enforcement Directorate(ED), and Judiciary. Suppression of dissent through laws like Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and sedition, curbing freedoms guaranteed under Article 19. Majoritarian politics are marginalising religious and ethnic minorities. Parliamentary debates are bypassed through centralisation of power, especially through ordinances. While electoral participation remains high and political competition vibrant, critics argue that democracy is being reduced to periodic elections without substantive freedoms.

5.6 Counter Arguments: The People’s Faith in Democracy

Despite institutional setbacks, popular support for democracy remains high in India. In fact, the Supreme Court in a landmark judgement in 2024 struck down the Electoral Bonds Scheme as it was unconstitutional for violating the right to information and transparency in political funding and accountability. The Supreme Court set up an independent committee to probe allegations of unauthorised surveillance using Pegasus spyware. It is an indication that the judiciary stands to defend the privacy and civil liberties of the people. The farmers’ yearlong peaceful protests against the three farm laws (The Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020) led to their repeal after civil dialogue and democratic dissent. The above indicates judicial activism, civil movements, etc., are actively strengthening Indian democracy.

Voter turnout has increased overtime, particularly among women and marginalised communities. Digital platforms have enabled civic participation, awareness, and protests like Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, Farmers’ movements, etc. Moreover, India’s democratic system still allows for electoral turnover, judicial interventions, and civil society mobilizations.

Table 1: Voters’ Turnout for 18 General Elections of Lok Sabha

| General Election of Lok Sabha | Election Year | Voter Turnout (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| 1st General Elections | 1951-52 | 44.87 |

| General Election of Lok Sabha | Election Year | Voter Turnout (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| 2nd General Elections | 1957 | 45.44 |
| 3rd General Elections | 1962 | 55.42 |
| 4th General Elections | 1967 | 61.04 |
| 5th General Elections | 1971 | 55.27 |
| 6th General Elections | 1977 | 60.49 |
| 7th General Elections | 1980 | 56.92 |
| 8th General Elections | 1984-85 | 64.01 |
| 9th General Elections | 1989 | 61.95 |
| 10th General Elections | 1991 | 56.73 |
| 11th General Elections | 1996 | 57.94 |
| 12th General Elections | 1998 | 61.97 |
| 13th General Elections | 1999 | 59.99 |
| 14th General Elections | 2004 | 58.07 |
| 15th General Elections | 2009 | 58.21 |
| 16th General Elections | 2014 | 66.44 |
| 17th General Elections | 2019 | 67.40 |
| 18th General Elections | 2024 | 65.79 |

(Source: <https://www.eci.gov.in/general-elections> and compilation)

Table 1 shows that Voter turnout was relatively very low for the first two general elections, recorded below 50% due to various factors like low literacy rate (18%), mistakes in Voters' list, limited political awareness etc. Voters' turnout increased since the 3rd general election; it is above 50%. In 2019 for 17th Lok Sabha general elections voter turnout was the highest with 67.40%.

5.7 Political Inclusivity

Political inclusivity in India is one of the greatest democratic achievements of the post-colonial world, from universal adult franchise to affirmative representation. India has attempted representation and intra-party democracy; the constitutional and institutional framework continues to evolve towards a more participatory and inclusive political order.

The Indian Constitution, Article 326, states that the election shall be on the basis of adult suffrage, i.e., every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than 18 years of age shall be entitled to vote at

the election provided he is not disqualified by any provision of the constitution or of any law made by the appropriate legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime, or corrupt or illegal practice. In the Indian constitution, there are temporary provisions for special representation of and reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. At present in Lok Sabha, 131 seats are reserved for SCs (84) and STs (47). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992 provided 33 percent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj and Urban Local Bodies; The 106th constitutional amendment Act of 2023 reserved 33 percent of total seats for women in Lok Sabha and also in State Legislative Assemblies. Besides, backward castes also get reservation in Panchayti Raj and Urban Local Bodies as per the state legislative act. Reducing the voting age from 21 years to 18 years was a radical step to include the participation of youth in the elections, due to this, nearly 4 crore young voters got voting rights, and they participated in the 1989 general elections.

6 Findings of the Study

6.1 The Public perception on Indian Democracy Deepening or Declining for 75 years of the Indian Polity:

In view of the India republic has completed 75 years, there is a need to assess the public opinion about the Indian democracy. It has been evolving since the 1st general elections in 1951-52 without any interruptions except emergency period of 1975-77. Its strengths, weaknesses, inclusivity, democracy deepening or declining over the last 75 years were assessed in view of the public opinion.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents Gender, Age, Educational qualification, and Area

| S.No. | Particulars of respondents | | | Percentage |
|-------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----|------------|
| 1 | Gender | Men | 28 | 56 |
| | | Women | 22 | 44 |
| 2 | Age Group | 18-35 Years | 15 | 30 |
| | | 36-50 Years | 19 | 38 |
| | | 51-65 Years | 13 | 26 |
| | | > 65 Years | 03 | 06 |
| 3 | Education Qualification | SSC/Intermediate (School Education) | 00 | 00 |
| | | UG/PG & Above (Higher Education) | 50 | 100 |

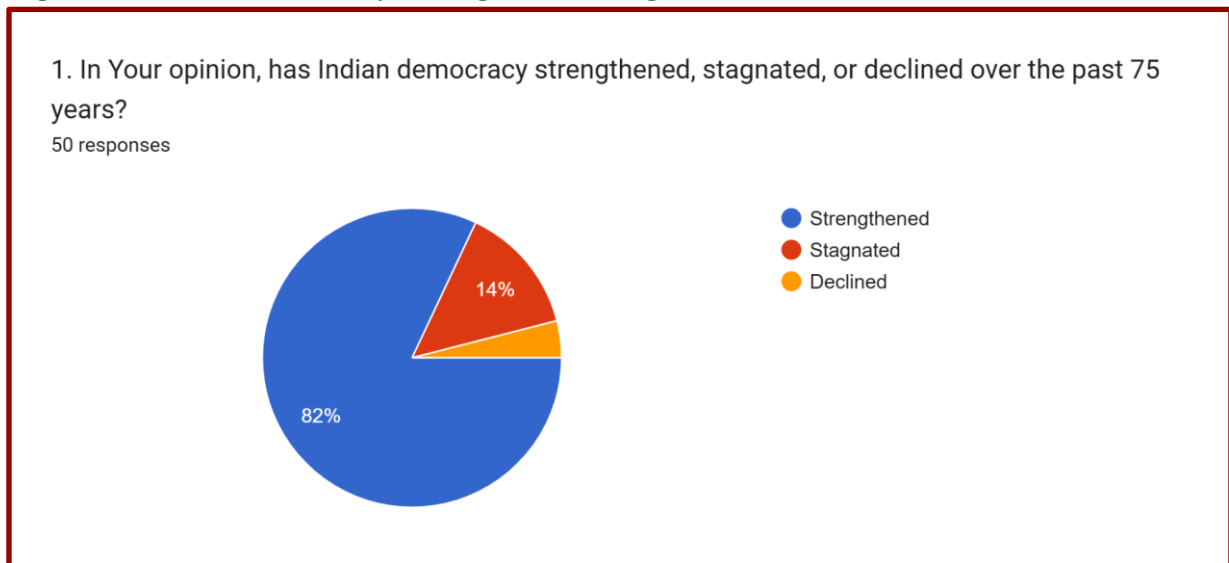
| | | | | |
|---|---------------|------------|----|----|
| | | Illiterate | 00 | 00 |
| 4 | Area/District | Chittoor | 25 | 50 |
| | | Tirupati | 25 | 50 |

(Source: Primary data)

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents' gender, age group, Educational qualification, and Area wise. The data shows that among the respondents men were 28 (56 %) and women were 22 (44%). The respondents in the age group between 18-35 years were 15 (30%), the age group 36-50 years were the highest 19 (38%), the age group 51-65 years 13 (26%) and the age group above 65 years were the least 03 (06%). The data shows that all the respondents were highly educated and area wise, from Chittoor district 25 (50%), and Tirupati district 25 (50%) were equally distributed.

6.2 Indian Democracy strengthened, Stagnated, or Declined over the past 75 years

Figure 1: Indian Democracy Strengthened, Stagnated, or Declined Over the Past 75 Years

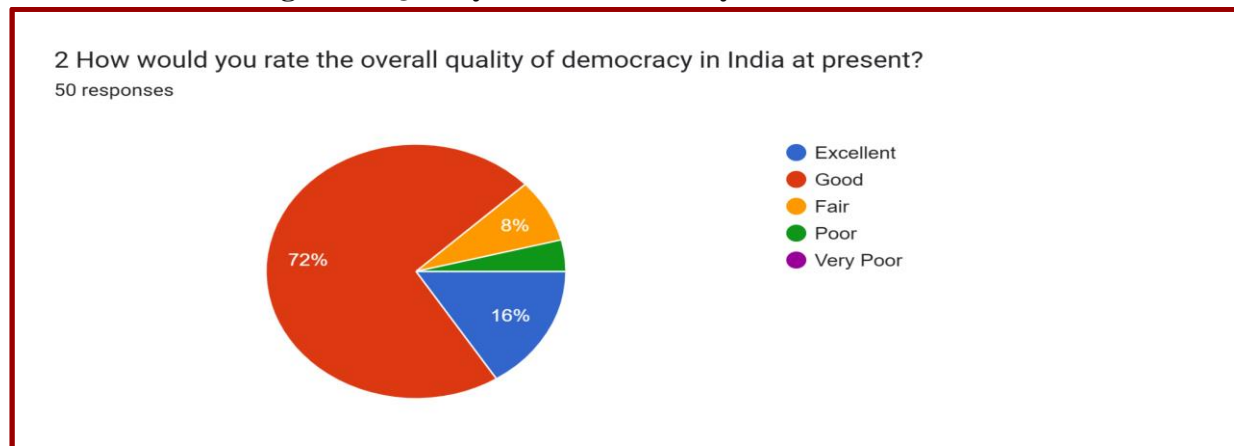


(Source: Primary data)

The vast majority 82 percent suggests that the democratic fabric of India has grown more resilient over time. Regular and fair elections, peaceful transfer of power and expansion of political participation, judicial activism etc made Indian democracy not just surviving but evolving. Only 14 % viewed institutional performance and democratic deepening may have plateaued. Electoral malpractices, tokenistic representation, limited intra party democracy are the main factors to come to this conclusion, and 4% said that decline, because of the centralisation of power, judicial delays etc, but the overall view is that Indian democracy is being strengthened.

6.3 Quality of the Democracy in India at Present

Figure 2: Quality of the Democracy in India at Present



(Source: Primary data)

A significant portion of respondents (88%) rated satisfaction, it reflects public services, institutional performance, governance, or outcomes are very good, but 8% Fair and 4% Poor reflects some sort of dissatisfaction likely stemming from issues such as inequality, inefficiency, or unaddressed grievances. Overall, it reveals that favourable view with clear signals for areas needing attention to achieve excellence for a wider population.

6.4 Free and Fair elections are consistently held in India

The 84% of the sample (36% Strongly agree and 48% Agree) believe that free and fair elections are consistently held in India, reflecting widespread public confidence in the electoral process. The 12% who remain neutral may be uncertain or perceive occasional irregularities in the elections, while the 4% who disagree represent a small but notable minority that questions the integrity of elections may be by seeing cash, liquor, freebies politics etc.

6.5 Citizens Feel Free to Express Their Political Opinions Without Fear

The significant majority of respondents 90% (38% Strongly agree and 52% Agree) feel free to express their political opinions without fear, indicating a strong perception of freedom of expression among citizens. This suggests that democratic norms related to thought, speech and political engagement are largely upheld in society. However, the 6% neutral and 4% who disagree highlight that a small portion of the population may experience hesitation or fear in voicing political views, possibly due to social, political or institutional pressures. While the overall outlook is positive, these concerns warrant attention to ensure inclusive and fearless democratic participation for all.

6.6 Indian Democracy has improved significantly over the past 75 years

The data reflects overwhelming optimism about the progress of Indian democracy, with 88% (36% Strongly agree and 52% Agree) believing it has significantly improved over the past 75 years. This suggests that most of the citizens recognise advancements in democratic institutions, electoral participation, civil liberties, and governance. The 10% neutral responses may indicate either a lack of awareness or a mixed perception of progress, while the 2% who disagree represents a minimal, but present skepticism, possibly due to concerns over current challenges. Overall, the sentiment underscores broad public confidence in India's democratic journey, while highlighting the need for continued reform and eternal vigilance of the public.

6.7 The Diversity of India is adequately represented in democratic institutions

The data reveals that a vast majority 90% (18% Strongly agree and 72% Agree) believe India's diversity is adequately represented in democratic institutions. This suggests strong public confidence in the inclusivity of various castes, religions, languages, and regions within the political system. The 6% neutral and 4% disagree indicate some concerns about underrepresentation or tokenism in certain areas like women, minorities. Overall, the perception is largely positive, reflecting approval of India's pluralistic ethos within its democratic framework.

6.8 Local Self-Governments (Panchayats & Municipalities) empower citizens at the grassroots level

The data shows that only 52% (12% Strongly agree and 40% Agree) believe Local Self-Governments empower citizens at the grassroots, indicating moderate confidence in their effectiveness. A significant 32% remain neutral, suggesting uncertainty or limited awareness about their role. Meanwhile, 16% disagree, pointing to dissatisfaction with their performance, possibly due to limited autonomy, inadequate resources, or political interference. Overall, the mixed responses highlight the need to strengthen and revitalise local governance to enhance grassroots empowerment and participation.

6.9 Gender equality in Political participation has significantly advanced in India

The data indicates that 62% (8% Strongly agree and 54% Agree) believe gender equality in political participation has significantly advanced in India, reflecting growing public recognition of women's increased involvement in politics. However, the 30% neutral responses suggest that many remain uncertain or see only partial progress. Additionally, 08% (06% Disagree and 02% Strongly disagree) express dissatisfaction, highlighting persistent challenges such as underrepresentation in Union and State level legislative bodies, social barriers, and gender bias. This calls for continued efforts to achieve true political gender equality.

6.10 Marginalised communities have improved political representation overtime in independent India

The data reveals that 72% (06% Strongly agree and 66% Agree) believe political representation of marginalised communities has improved over time in independent India, indicating broad public recognition of affirmative policies and social progress. However, the 24% neutral responses suggest uncertainty or perceived limitations in the depth or effectiveness of this representation. The 04% who disagree reflect a minority view that challenges the extent of inclusion. Overall, while progress is acknowledged, there remains a need for more equitable and meaningful participation.

6.11 The Young People have sufficient voice in political and policy decisions

The data indicates that 70% (14% Strongly agree and 56% Agree) believe Young people have a sufficient voice in political and policy decisions, reflecting positive perception of youth inclusion in governance. However, 20% remain neutral, indicating uncertainty or limited awareness of youth influence. The 10% who disagree highlight concerns about tokenism or lack of real decision-making power. Overall, while youth engagement is recognised, there is a scope to enhance their meaningful participation in shaping policies.

6.12 Political parties are internally democratic and transparent

The data indicates significant skepticism about internal democracy and transparency within political parties, with 52% (32% Disagree and 20% Strongly disagree) expressing dissatisfaction only 36% (6% Strongly agree and 30% Agree) believe parties uphold internal democratic values, while 12% remain neutral. This suggests widespread concern over centralised leadership, lack of accountability, and opaque decision-making processes. The findings highlight the urgent need for political reforms to ensure

greater internal democracy and transparency within India's party system.

7 Conclusion

Indian democracy over the past 75 years is a story of both deepening and sometimes decline. It has matured in terms of electoral participation, federalism, social inclusion, and grassroots governance. Political parties' internal democracy is very meagre; women representation should be increased. Transparency, accountability, integrity have to be enhanced in Indian politics. The future of Indian democracy hinges on revitalising constitutional values, ensuring institutional independence, promoting informed citizenry, and safeguarding rights-based governance. The question is not whether democracy will survive, whether it will remain substantive and inclusive, transparent, accountable rather than merely procedural.

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