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# Toward a Competency-Based Electoral System in India: A Proposal for Formal Education and Examination of Political Candidates

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**ABSTRACT:** India's electoral system presently imposes minimal candidacy requirements (citizenship and age). This article examines the risks of unqualified leadership under the status quo – using analogies (e.g. an untrained pilot) – and critiques systemic limitations, including criminalization and the absence of formal skill benchmarks. We propose the **Indian Competency-based Electoral System (ICES)**: a structured framework of educational and examination pathways for prospective political leaders. Key components include new degree programs (B.A./M.A./Ph.D. in Governance or Public Policy), competitive "Indian Politician Service (IPoS)" exams at national and state levels, post-selection apprenticeships under senior legislators, role-specific eligibility criteria tied to specialized education, and integration schemes for highly qualified but unelected candidates. These measures are designed to be legally viable under the Indian Constitution (Article 84/173(c) allows "qualifications as may be prescribed" by law) and draw on comparisons (e.g. Pakistan's post graduate requirement for parliament, India's state-local educational rules). Through robust academic and policy analysis, we argue that ICES could elevate the quality and effectiveness of India's

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legislature, yielding leaders better prepared to advance national development.
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## Introduction

India's parliamentary democracy is underpinned by universal adult suffrage and first-past-the-post elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. The Constitution (Articles 84 and 173) mandates only basic qualifications for lawmakers – namely Indian citizenship and a minimum age (25 for Lok Sabha/Assemblies) – with "other qualifications as may be prescribed" by law. Beyond these, there is *no statutory educational requirement* for candidates. In practice, the Election Commission does require all candidates to **declare** their highest educational qualification when filing affidavits, but this information is for transparency rather than eligibility. The result is a highly varied pool of legislators: while the 18th Lok Sabha saw *no illiterate members*, about 19% of MPs had education up to Class X–XII only (and roughly 78% have at least undergraduate degrees). Meanwhile, other warning signs abound. An ADR analysis found a record **46% of newly elected MPs in 2024** face criminal (with 31% facing *serious* charges like murder). Nepotistic dynasties and moneyed interests also skew candidacy selection. Critics note the irony: even routine government jobs often mandate basic education, yet our highest lawmakers have no such checks. For instance, former Election Commissioner G.V.G. Krishnamurthy observed, "We cannot have persons who are illiterates…swear by the constitution not knowing its contents", and the irony that "we require a literate peon with an illiterate lawmaker" has been derided as absurd.

These facts suggest current laws do not guarantee sufficient competence or integrity in legislators. In any complex society, entrusting governance to entirely untested individuals seems precarious – akin to letting an untrained person pilot an airplane. Pilots and doctors are rigorously licensed for public safety; yet India's electoral regime imposes no analogous standards for those wielding legislative power. This gap raises critical questions: **Should political candidates meet formal educational or exam-based criteria?** Could requiring qualifications improve governance? This paper answers in the affirmative. We analyze analogies and global precedents, and

then detail a novel ***Indian Competency-based Electoral System (ICES)*** that remains constitutionally and legally feasible. Our proposal is backed by authoritative sources on existing rules and reforms, and it responds directly to the shortcomings of the current system.

## Challenges of the Current Electoral System

Despite its democratic ideals, India's electoral process faces notable challenges in candidate quality. The absence of any statutory competency test means that party patronage, wealth and name-recognition often dictate who runs. The 18th Lok Sabha results illustrate this paradox: on one hand, a majority of MPs are well-educated (roughly 80% graduates). On the other hand, nearly half are entangled in criminal case. Such criminalization is a grave concern: for example, 27 MPs have *convictions* for crimes including murder or rape. In effect, the electorate is frequently confronted with a choice among many candidates, some of whom may lack relevant knowledge or even bear serious legal encumbrances.

**Unqualified leadership (analogy):** Consider the metaphor of the unqualified pilot. A family would never board an airplane knowing its pilot had no training. Yet in politics, voters have no practical way to gauge if a candidate truly understands complex policy issues. Once elected, an unprepared legislator must learn on the job, often with life-and-death implications for citizens (e.g. drafting budgets, laws, crisis responses). The notion that good intentions suffice is naive; effective governance demands skills in economics, law, science, etc. Critics thus compare the status quo to hiring doctors without medical degrees or hiring pilots who failed flight school – a risky business that our current system tacitly permits for legislators.

**Systemic limitations:** Beyond individual competence, the electoral system also suffers from structural weaknesses. Party gatekeeping and dynastic politics limit fresh talent: numerous MPs come from established political families (an estimated 24% in 2014), which concentrates power and often sidelines merit-based entrants. Campaign costs are exorbitant, favoring wealthy aspirants. Transparency measures exist (disclosure of assets, criminal record, education, but they alone cannot bar unsuitable candidates; they only inform voters. Efforts to reform (e.g. campaign

finance laws, anti-defection rules) have addressed some issues, but the *initial selection* of candidates remains virtually unrestricted. This status quo has long attracted criticism from constitutional scholars. For instance, the Constituent Assembly debated and ultimately **rejected** any literacy tests for legislators (arguing such tests would wrongly assume illiteracy equals ignorance). Post-independence, former judges and election commissioners have still urged change: N.A. Palkhivala lamented the "grim irony" that legislators need no qualifications while even junior staff do, and CEC M.S. Gill (1999) insisted "minimum educational qualifications must be prescribed" so that lawmakers can actually *read bills and papers*. In short, experts note that without baseline qualifications, the *efficiency and honesty* of governance may suffer.

In practice, some evidence supports this concern. Studies show that countries with more educated leaders often enjoy better policy outcomes (factors include skills and informed decision-making). The Supreme Court of India has even upheld education-based criteria at the local level, stating in 2023 that education is "a precondition for efficiency" and that educated persons have a better moral compass. Yet at the national level, such criteria are absent. The gap between where India stands (an open eligibility model) and where others have experimented (see below) frames the need for reform.

**The Indian Competency-based Electoral System (ICES)**

To address these gaps, we propose the **Indian Competency-based Electoral System (ICES)**. ICES envisions a multi-pronged framework whereby aspiring politicians undergo formal education and testing before candidacy, akin to other professional certifications. This system would be enacted by Parliament under its constitutional authority to prescribe additional qualifications. The main elements of ICES are:

- **Specialized Degree Programs:** Establish dedicated academic pathways for politics and governance. For example, universities could introduce a *Bachelor of Governance* or *Bachelor of Political Science* (majoring in public administration, economics, law, or policy). Similarly, *Master's* and *Ph.D.* programs in Public Policy, International Relations, Public Health

Administration, Environmental Governance, etc., would train candidates in specific domains. These curricula would combine social science theory with practical governance skills (legislative drafting, ethics, management). Over time, these degrees would become a de facto preparation for political careers. (Indeed, many world universities already offer M.P.A. or political science degrees; ICES would formalize and expand these with a clear public service focus.)

- **Competency Exams (IPoS):** Create new public-service examinations specifically for political candidates. At the **national level**, an *Indian Politician Service (IPoS)* exam – administered by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) – would vet applicants for Parliament. At the **state level**, analogous *State Politician Service (SPoS)* exams would be conducted by State Public Service Commissions. The syllabus would cover constitutional law, economics, public policy, current affairs, ethics, and relevant domain knowledge (e.g. agriculture policy for rural constituencies). Exams would test both knowledge and critical reasoning, possibly in multiple stages (written tests and interviews). Only those who pass the exam would be eligible to contest elections. (This is analogous to the Civil Services exam for administrative officers, which ensures baseline competence.)

- **Probation and Mentorship:** Candidates who clear the exams (and subsequently win elections) would serve a *probationary period* while learning legislative processes. During this period, they would be paired with senior, experienced legislators as mentors. This apprenticeship (lasting, say, 6–12 months) would immerse new legislators in parliamentary procedures, debate skills, and constituency duties. By contrast with the current "trial by fire" approach, the probation would systematically build on what candidates learned in school. Such mentorship echoes existing bureaucratic training (e.g. IAS officers undergo induction at LBSNAA), but here it would be applied to elected officials. At the end of probation, a review (by a parliamentary committee) would confirm full membership status.

- **Role-Specific Eligibility:** Within ICES, additional criteria could link candidate roles to education. For instance, a candidate wishing to run on a **finance/economics** platform would need an economics or commerce background. Someone focusing on **health policy** should have relevant training (medicine, public health). The aim is to match legislators' specialization with their portfolio domains. This does *not* ban specialists from other fields entering politics, but encourages parties to nominate candidates whose academics align with their planned responsibilities. Such role-based requisites could be detailed in legislation (e.g. contesting a parliamentary seat with a reserved portfolio might require at least a Master's degree in that field). This ensures that complex policy portfolios are handled by those with deep knowledge.

- **Post-Election Integration Schemes:** Recognizing that many well-qualified candidates may not win elections, ICES would incorporate pathways for these individuals. For example, the Constitution already provides for a small number of nominated experts in the Rajya Sabha (12 presidential nominees with expertise in literature, science, art or social service). ICES could expand this concept. Laws might create additional *advisory councils*, *think tanks*, or *joint committees* staffed by top IPoS-qualified candidates who lost but demonstrated competence. Similarly, political parties could be required (or incentivized) to appoint high-scoring exam candidates to shadow minister roles or policy research posts. This "best loser" model ensures the investment in training is not wasted. Over time, some of these experts could be appointed to second-chamber bodies or special commissions, maintaining their engagement in governance.

This ICES blueprint is novel but **legally viable**. The Constitution's framers explicitly allowed Parliament to fix extra qualifications by law. In fact, Article 84(c) and 173(c) anticipate just this: legislative choices on candidate eligibility. Implementing ICES would require enacting or amending the Representation of the People Act (1951) and related statutes, but would not violate fundamental rights (it merely conditions *candidacy*, not the right to vote). Of course, any educational prerequisites must be

calibrated to avoid disenfranchising the poor or marginalized; however, India's Supreme Court has already upheld state laws tying basic education to local office, reasoning that "education is a precondition for efficiency" in governance. Those court findings lend credibility to ICES's thrust.

**Global and Comparative Perspectives**

While ICES is primarily India-focused, some international examples are instructive. Pakistan under General Musharraf (2002–2010) instituted a *graduate degree requirement* for its National Assembly and provincial legislatures. That constitutional amendment mandated at least a bachelor's degree for MPs. (This rule was later revoked, but it demonstrated a high-profile attempt to tie education to eligibility.) Similarly, in recent years Indian states like Haryana and Rajasthan legislated minimal schooling for Panchayat elections. For instance, the 2015 Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Amendment required candidates for district-level bodies to have passed Class X (and Class VIII for village heads), and Haryana's rules set Class X as a benchmark for general male candidates (Class VIII for general women, lower thresholds for SC/ST applicants). The Supreme Court upheld these local laws, endorsing the idea that education can lead to more informed governance. Outside South Asia, formal educational tests for national legislators are rare in democracies, but many countries emphasize training for elected members once in office (e.g. induction programs in the US Congress or orientation camps for new MPs in Canada). The ICES, by contrast, *front-loads* competency screening before election.

Notably, India already uses examinations for other public roles (e.g. civil services via UPSC, judiciary via judicial exams). Extending this merit-based selection to the political sphere is unprecedented in liberal democracies but has analogies in hybrid systems. For example, Iran's Guardian Council screens parliamentary candidates for ideological and educational criteria. While direct comparisons are limited, the global trend towards competency in governance (linked to Sustainable Development and good administration) underscores ICES's relevance. In sum, similar ideas have been floated abroad (and partially applied) – often to mixed results – but they have not been tried in India at the national level. The ICES proposal offers a uniquely Indian solution consistent with global best practices on ensuring capable leadership.

## Constitutional and Legal Considerations

Crucially, all ICES measures must comply with India's Constitution and laws. As noted, Articles 84 and 173 explicitly reserve to Parliament the power to prescribe *any additional* qualifications. Therefore, a parliamentary act could set education/exam criteria without a formal amendment. The Representation of the People Act (1951) currently only codifies basic disqualifications (e.g. criminal convictions, unsound mind), but it could be amended to include an educational clause. Any such law would likely be challenged in courts, so constitutional intent must be clear. Here, the historical record provides guidance: the Constituent Assembly debated literacy tests and ultimately rejected them, but did so recognizing that the legislature could impose qualifications if needed. Contemporary arguments (e.g. from CEC Gill and others) also emphasize that literacy for lawmakers is not a constitutional impossibility. In fact, the very idea of "competency" dovetails with the parliamentary system: ministers are drawn from elected members, so ensuring those members are prepared strengthens governance. Moreover, analogous provisions already exist: Article 80 allows the President to nominate up to 12 experts to the Rajya Sabha. This constitutional precedent confirms that India values non-elective contributions of qualified individuals. ICES's more expansive framework would be a logical extension of such principles, applied on a broader scale.

## Conclusion

India's future development depends critically on the quality of its governance. The proposed Indian Competency-based Electoral System (ICES) aims to institutionalize merit and knowledge in the political arena. By introducing specialized degrees, rigorous selection exams (IPoS), structured training/mentorship, and role-aligned eligibility, ICES would ensure that legislative candidates possess the education and skills necessary to craft effective policy. Highly qualified individuals who are not elected would still contribute through designated roles, preventing wastage of talent. Such a model promises multiple benefits: more informed debate in Parliament, efficient lawmaking, and reduced susceptibility to corruption (the Supreme Court itself noted that "educated persons cannot be dishonest" when properly grounded). Legally, ICES builds on constitutional provisions for candidate qualifications and

existing expert nominations. Politically, it offers a transparent, objective path to leadership rather than patronage or patron-client power. In summary, ICES represents a vision for electoral reform that aligns India's democratic process with the demands of modern governance. By formalizing education and examination for candidates, India could greatly enhance the caliber of its lawmakers – a step that would profoundly benefit national development and the well-being of its 1.4 billion citizens.

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