

How Administrative Power Shapes Democracy (Part II)

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November 22, 2025

In [Part I](#), we saw how a statistical study of the 2019 Lok Sabha election revealed an unusual pattern of too many close wins for the ruling party to be explained by luck or campaigning alone.

This second part asks what that pattern means and how small administrative biases can quietly accumulate into political advantage.

Note: Like Part I, this section was completed on 9 November 2025, well before the Bihar election results.

5. Testing the Manipulation Hypothesis

With the campaigning explanation ruled out, Das turns to a harder question: could the irregular pattern of close wins be linked to how elections were *administered* rather than how they were *fought*?

He doesn't claim fraud; he asks whether different layers of the electoral process—registration, turnout, and counting—show subtle but consistent biases that together could explain the kink in the data. Each of these arenas leaves its own statistical trace.



MISSION MODE: A BLO collecting forms from voters during Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in the Sandesh assembly segment, Bhojpur district, Jul. 5. (Photo: Ranjan Rahi)

Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20250721-bihars-special-intensive-revision-citizenship-on-trial-2754238-2025-07-11>

5.1. Voter Registration

The first place where distortions can begin is the voter list itself.

If eligible voters are missing from the rolls, or if certain groups are underrepresented, that bias affects every downstream measure—turnout, margins, and victory probabilities.

Das compares constituencies across states to see whether changes in registered voters between 2014 and 2019 systematically differ between BJP-governed and opposition-governed states.

He finds small but consistent discrepancies: in the months leading up to the election, **growth in registered voters was slightly lower** in states where the BJP held power.

This does not prove deliberate deletion, but it does suggest that administrative control over voter-roll maintenance may have been unevenly exercised. The result is subtle — not mass disenfranchisement, but a small skew in who appears on the rolls in the first place.

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5.2 Turnout Patterns

The second arena is turnout.

In most elections, turnout and ruling-party performance are not tightly linked. But when the relationship becomes *too* strong—when surges in turnout consistently favour one side— it can signal problems such as inflated counts or selective mobilisation.

Das examines whether the BJP's vote share increased disproportionately in constituencies that showed unusual jumps in turnout between 2014 and 2019.

He finds that the correlation between turnout and BJP performance is much stronger in states the party governed.

That pattern could, in principle, reflect effective voter mobilisation, but combined with the earlier registration irregularities, **it raises the possibility that administrative machinery and political advantage moved in tandem.**

5.3 Counting Oversight

The final stage of potential distortion is the counting process itself, the physical tabulation of votes.

Here Das looks for inconsistencies between constituency-level data and polling-station-level data that feed into them.

Where the results were very close, do the smaller units aggregate cleanly into the reported totals, or do they show small anomalies that tilt in one direction?

He finds that these irregularities, while numerically tiny, tend to favour the ruling party in the closest races.

No single discrepancy is large enough to matter; what matters is their cumulative direction.

Each layer of the process—registration, turnout, and counting—seems to lean slightly the same way.

5.4 Reading the Pattern

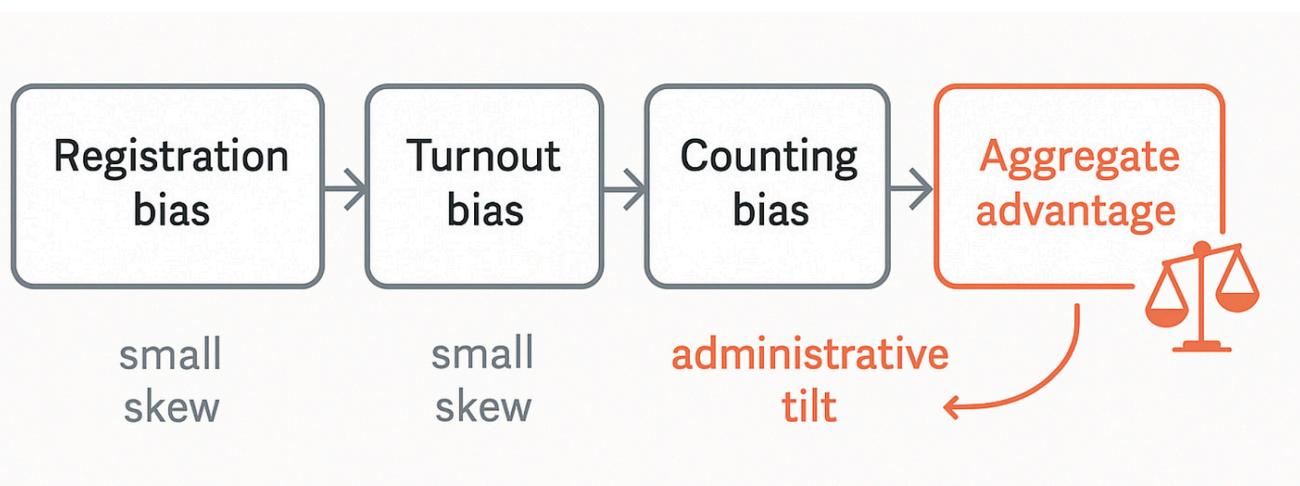
Taken together, these findings don't amount to proof of manipulation in any legal sense.

But they do indicate that **administrative bias, even at very small scales, can produce national-level distortions** when concentrated in marginal seats.

Das's argument is careful. He never claims that votes were stolen, only that the data's internal logic—the way margins, turnout, and registration interact—is inconsistent with pure randomness or campaign skill.

So, the analysis detects patterns in the structure of results that contradict what we had expect from random, fair competition.

Figure 3. How Small Administrative Biases Add Up



Note: Elections are built from layers of administration—registration, turnout, and counting. A tiny skew at any one layer might seem negligible. But when all three lean in the same direction, their effects accumulate, especially in close contests. This cumulative tilt is what Das's statistical irregularities hint at, and what the later discussion calls executive aggrandizement in practice.

For readers today, revisiting these findings matters because the context has changed.

When the Election Commission now undertakes nationwide “cleaning” of voter rolls, the very stage where Das first detected bias becomes the focal point of state power.

His paper thus reads less as a postmortem of 2019 and more as a warning about how small administrative asymmetries can accumulate into political advantage.

6. The Political Logic of Subtle Control

The irregularities that Das uncovered—small skews in registration, turnout, and counting—map neatly onto how scholars of democratic decline describe the new authoritarianism. Around the world, democracies rarely collapse through coups or emergencies anymore. Instead, they **erode from within**, through what political scientist Nancy Bermeo calls *democratic backsliding*, the state-led weakening of institutions that sustain a democracy.

One major route to this erosion is **executive aggrandizement**, Bermeo’s term for the gradual concentration of power by elected leaders who use democratic procedures to hollow out democracy itself. **Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt**, in *How Democracies Die*, show that this process does not suspend elections or constitutions; it **recalibrates them**. Leaders exploit the letter of the law to weaken accountability—controlling referees, changing rules, and stacking oversight bodies—until competition remains formal but not fair.

Tarunabh Khaitan extends this framework to India, describing a form of *counter-majoritarian capture* that proceeds along three axes of accountability. The first, **vertical accountability**, links rulers to citizens through elections. Here capture works by tilting the playing field—through control of election finance, partisan redistricting, or, as Das’s data suggest, manipulating voter rolls and turnout patterns. The second, **horizontal accountability**, consists of checks from other state institutions like courts, legislators and regulators. It erodes when appointments, audits, and disciplinary powers are used to secure obedience rather than oversight. The third, **diagonal accountability**, lies in civil society and public disclosure—the media, universities, and NGOs that keep government on their toes. It weakens when criticism is criminalised and the state’s legitimacy is presented as identical with the ruling party’s.

In India, Christophe Jaffrelot describes the same transformation sociologically as *de-institutionalisation from within*. Institutions survive in form but lose autonomy in function. Bureaucrats, regulators, and election officials continue their routines but act as extensions of executive strategy.

Das’s paper offers a statistical portrait of this process. His anomalies—slower voter-roll growth in ruling-party states, turnout surges aligned with incumbents, small counting asymmetries—illustrate how executive aggrandizement looks when it filters down to administration.

If you read the paper this way, it suddenly starts to look like a forensic record of **how democracy loses its uncertainty**. Elections still happen, data are still published, procedures go on, but their outcomes are increasingly predictable. The machinery of democracy now actively only serves those in power.

7. What This Means for Democratic Scrutiny

It is easy, and not unreasonable, to believe that India's democracy remains resilient. Elections are regular, transitions of power still occur in the states, and the administrative scale of voting is unmatched. Many would argue that these facts alone prove the system works.

Das's paper does not dispute that. What we should be asking based on these findings is this:

Can a democracy remain healthy if the uncertainty that makes elections meaningful is quietly reduced?

His findings about narrow victories and administrative asymmetries show that uncertainty can shrink without anyone declaring an emergency or cancelling a vote.

The Election Commission's **Special Intensive Revision** (SIR) of electoral rolls illustrates this point. Officially, the revision is a housekeeping exercise of updating addresses, deleting duplicates, and confirming eligibility. In practice, the process has been opaque, unevenly implemented, and heavily centralised. Millions of names were flagged for deletion in Bihar alone, and the same procedure is now being extended nationwide. None of this necessarily proves bias. But when such revisions take place without transparent audit, public notice, or independent oversight, they move an electoral system from **trust by design** to **trust by assertion**—citizens are asked to believe in fairness rather than to see it.

This is where Das's analysis matters. It is a demonstration of how ordinary administrative practices can acquire political weight when insulation becomes opacity. Democracies, especially large ones, depend on faith in process—but faith must rest on verification. When the procedures of verification themselves become opaque, belief turns fragile.

To worry about this is not to doubt India's democracy, it is to take it seriously. A system as complex and decentralised as ours needs constant calibration, and that requires citizens who can read its signals. Treating data, audits, and institutional decisions as objects of public reasoning is an essential component of that calibration. If India's democracy is indeed robust, it should be able to withstand such scrutiny and even welcome it.

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Further Reading and Data Sources

I. On Democratic Backsliding and Executive Aggrandizement

Nancy Bermeo (2016) — “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1): 5–19.

The foundational essay on how modern democracies erode not through coups, but through legal, gradual weakening of institutions. Introduces the concept of *executive aggrandizement*.

Tarunabh Khaitan (2020) — “Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts: Executive Aggrandizement and Party-State Fusion in India,” *Law & Ethics of Human Rights*, 14(1): 49–93.

A detailed framework for understanding India’s institutional decline through the erosion of vertical (electoral), horizontal (institutional), and diagonal (discursive) accountability.

Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt (2018) — *How Democracies Die* (Crown).

A comparative study showing how elected leaders dismantle constraints “by the rules of the game” while keeping democratic forms intact.

Christophe Jaffrelot (2021) — *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press).

A sociological account of India’s democratic de-institutionalisation — how bureaucracy and regulation continue in form but lose neutrality in function.

II. On Election Forensics and Statistical Detection

Justin McCrary (2008) — “Manipulation of the Running Variable in the Regression Discontinuity Design: A Density Test,” *Journal of Econometrics*, 142(2): 698–714.

The paper introducing the “McCrary Test,” used in election forensics to detect unnatural clustering of results near a cutoff.

Walter R. Mebane, R. Michael Alvarez, Thad E. Hall & Susan D. Hyde (2008) — “Election Forensics: The Second-Digit Benford’s Law Test and Recent American Presidential Elections,” in *Election Fraud: Detecting and Deterring Electoral Manipulation* (Brookings Institution Press), 162–181.

A classic alternative forensic technique, useful for readers interested in how different statistical tools detect irregularities in vote counts.

III. Data and Empirical Sources Referenced in Das’s Study

Election Commission of India (ECI): Statistical Reports of General Elections (2004–2019)

Constituency-level results with candidate names, vote shares, turnout, and NOTA counts.
eci.gov.in/statistical-report

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS): National Election Studies (NES) 2019

Post-election survey of roughly 24,000 respondents, capturing campaign contact, rally attendance, and digital outreach.

Polling-Station-Level Results (ECI Form 20 Data)

Public PDFs compiled by the ECI, used to cross-check constituency aggregates for counting consistency.