

# **Quality of the Electoral Rolls in Kerala: Issues, Concerns and Prospects**

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The presence of massive duplicate entries of electors in the electoral rolls of the recently concluded assembly elections (2021) reignited debate in Kerala and even drew national attention. Given this background, this paper explores the possible magnitude of discrepancies of electors in the electoral rolls of the state considering the demographic trajectories of its electoral population. To assess the magnitude of electoral roll discrepancies, the electors enumerated in the electoral rolls used for state assembly elections were compared to the projected electoral population in the electoral age groups (18+) using the Cohort Component Method. Approximately five lakh male electors must be removed from the electoral roll, while three lakh missing female electors must be identified and added to the roll to make it more comprehensive and authentic. These findings exhibit significant incongruities in the electoral roll, necessitating the intervention of the Election Commission in purifying the existing electoral roll of the state.

**Keywords:** Electoral Roll, Election Commission, Electors, Projected Electors, Census and Assembly Elections

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On April 6, 2021, Kerala conducted elections for its 16<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly, which included 140 constituencies. During the election campaigns, serious concerns were raised on the impeccability of the voter's list, or the electoral roll (hereafter roll) used for the elections, as it contained duplicate/bogus electors. Alleging anomalies with the rolls prior to each election is a common practice in the Indian electoral arena. But this time, unlike previous occasions, the opposition parties have come up with the magnitude of duplicate entries of the electors in the rolls at the micro (constituency wise) and macro (district and state) level. They used the expertise of management professionals as well as software technologies to determine the magnitude of multiple voter entries, in addition to checking electoral data at the booth level. The issue was brought to spotlight when it was feared that the volume of copious entries of voters had reached such an alarming proportion that it would jeopardise the winning probabilities of candidates in some of the constituencies. As a result, various estimates of duplicate entries of the voters are now available, including the one provided by the Election Commission (EC). This has opened the eyes of the EC to take necessary purification drives in the eleventh hour and the effectiveness of such exercises remains uncharted.

A defect-free electoral roll is thought to be an important constituent for a free and fair election process so as to reflect the vox populi of the voters. The immaculateness of the rolls is contingent on the enrolment of all the eligible electors (ages 18 and above) and removing all the ineligible electors from the rolls. Dual entry of electors occurs when the names of electors appear on the voters list more than once. This happens due to various reasons, which include the failure to remove deceased electors from the rolls, electors' reluctance to remove their duplicate entries, lack of mechanisms to make appropriate allowances for absenteeism and change in the domiciles of the electors, among others. In general, both under enumeration and over enumeration exerts strains on an inclusive and flawless democratic exercise within the current scheme of electoral framework. The EC faces managerial challenges in properly updating the rolls due to the ballooning size of its electors and lack of reliable statistics on mortality and migratory trends. Apart from that, ignorance of the vast majority of the public about their role in democratic process may impede the accuracy of the rolls. In the context of the current controversies and asymmetries in the rolls, the present study takes up a comparative assessment of the electors enumerated in the rolls with that of the likely eligible electors currently residing in the state. In the absence of an alternative mechanism, this exercise not only sheds light on the magnitude of discrepancies in the rolls, but also allows the EC to steer electoral roll purification efforts in the right direction. Furthermore, even if no census is conducted, the EC can compare its enrolled electors to eligible electors at any time using the methodology followed here.

### **Estimation of Electoral Population: Methodological Challenges**

There is very little evidence in the literature dealing with incompatibilities in the rolls used for the elections in the country (Sivaramakrishnan, 1997; Retnakumar, 2009; 2009a, Shariff and Khalid 2018). The EC is aware of the irregularities on the rolls as well. Soon after the publication of census results, the EC is supposed to conduct comparative studies of electors with the corresponding population enumerated in census age groups to understand the magnitude of errors in the rolls used for Lok Sabha (LS) and Legislative Assembly (LA) elections. However, it is extremely difficult for the EC to conduct such a benchmarking exercise of electors on account of two reasons. First, the year of elections and the year of census seldom coincide. Even if they were identical, estimating the electors enumerated in the census can only be done after the publication of the census single-year age returns, which in the 2011 census was published after a year. The gestation gap would have been much longer in earlier censuses.

The Statistical Report of Sample Registration System (SRS), published annually by the Registrar General of India, is a valuable source of information on the age-sex distribution of the population at the state level. Because the report does not include projected population figures, it becomes difficult to compute the exact number of electors at the state level. As these estimates are based on sample population, such distribution provides only an abridged sketch of the population distribution, and the estimation of the electors may not yield precise results. Even if projected populations are available, the presentation of age-distribution in five-year intervals makes segregating the population in electoral ages difficult. The estimation of electors at the state level for 2021 using the most recent population projections provided by the Census of India (2019) faces similar challenges in splitting the population into

ages 18 and 19 from the five-year age groups of 15-19. The population in these single years must be added to the population in the higher age groups to arrive at the correct number of electors. Although interpolation techniques such as Sprague's Multipliers can assist in the division of broad age groups into single-year ages, the results may be inaccurate. In the absence of the 2021 census age distribution data, the electors on the rolls can only be compared to an estimated electoral population based on a fresh population projection at the state level.

A pertinent question that must be addressed in this context is whether all eligible electors do really enroll? The pattern of elector enrolment is determined by a variety of factors. A citizen can avoid enrolling by using the provisions of Article 326, as the Constitution imposes no obligation on any citizen to be compulsorily enrolled once he/she becomes an eligible elector. Another critical factor is that the EC's electoral registration propaganda need not always reach the intended electors. The EC uses media platforms such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio to publicise roll revision campaigns. However, only a small percentage of the population in Kerala (3 percent of women and 1 percent of men aged 15-49) was not regularly exposed to any of these mass media during 2015-16 (IIPS and CIF 2018: 38). Thus, we do not have any statistics on the percentage of people knowingly or unknowingly remaining unenrolled in the rolls. Given the mass media exposure levels of the population and other socio-economic-political milieu of the state, it is safe to assume that a vast majority of eligible electors enrol in a time bound manner. In fact, the Electoral Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) has been commonly used in the state as an important document of identification reinforces this point even further. The fact that voter turnout was relatively higher in previously held elections in the state demonstrates the massive involvement of voters in the electoral process.

### **Methods and Materials**

The electoral population of Kerala was projected till 2021 using the smoothed age-sex distribution of the base year population enumerated in 2011 census. We have used the past SRS based fertility and mortality trends (2011 onwards) to assess the current electoral size. As Kerala had already attained below replacement fertility and reported to have the TFR level of 1.7 as per the estimates of 2018, it is assumed that this trend will continue for the next three years. Despite minor fluctuations, the state has consistently maintained a TFR level of 1.7 since 2001. However, neither current nor projected fertility trends are likely to have an impact on the state's voter strength. The current size of the voter population is largely a function of past fertility trends. In contrast to fertility trends, current mortality and migratory trends, particularly in the electoral ages, may have an impact on their current voter size.

Gender-specific life expectancies are provided in the SRS based abridged life tables for 2009-13 (mid-year 2011) and subsequent periods until 2014-18 (mid-year 2016). Using the 2014-18 life tables as the base, life expectancies are projected through the United Nations' medium pace working model (United Nations 2000: 185). In the absence of comprehensive migration data, it is assumed that the migration rates estimated as per 2011 census continue to remain till 2021. The electors in the census age groups are projected using the cohort component method of population projection with the help of Spectrum projection software. Demographic trajectories of the state, particularly in terms of fertility and mortality are mostly predictable, but this may not be the case for migration, which is a critical factor influencing

current population size. As per the most recent data, there are 34.85 lakh migrant workers in the state in 2018 (UNDP 2018: 265). Studies conducted in Ernakulam district, one of the regions with highest size of in-migrant workers, have found that only a negligible segment (0.5 percent) of them own houses (Peter Benoy et.al 2020:24). It is an indication that only a marginal number of migrant workers permanently settle down in Kerala. Permanent address proofs are usually required to obtain EPICs, preventing them from exercising their franchise in the state. There are instances of return of migrant workers at the time of festivals and elections (The Hindu, 2019). As a result, to an extent, we can conclude that the influx of in-migrants has little effect on the voter share of the state.

### Magnitude of Discrepancies

Attempts have been made to assess the discrepancies in the rolls used in two LS elections (2014 and 2019) and three LA elections (2011, 2016 and 2021). At the state level, the number of electors in LA and LS elections remains the same because the former adds up to the size of the latter. As per the statistics supplied by the EC, there were 2.32 crore (1.11 crore males and 1.21 crore females) electors on the roll used for 2011 elections. As per the most recent EC data, 2.74 crore electors (1.33 crore males and 1.41 crore females) are eligible to vote in the 2021 election (Table: 1). The EC prepared a booth level list of ASD (Absent, Shifted, Dead/ Duplicate) voters along with the final roll for conducting elections in the context of controversies and as a procedure to minimise the anomalies. Further, the EC has gathered information of voters (taken photographs and thumb impressions), who voted from the ASD list. Even after aberrances were noticed, there was no change in the total number of electors on the final roll used in the election.

**TABLE 1: Comparison of electoral population of Kerala, 2011-2021**

Year	Electors (as per roll)			Electors (projected)			Variations			Under enumeration/ over enumeration of electors in the rolls (per lakh)		
(1)	(2)			(3)			(4)=(2)-(3)			(5)		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
2011	1.11	1.21	2.32	1.12	1.28	2.40	-0.01	-0.07	-0.08	-901	-5785	-3448
2014	1.17	1.26	2.43	1.17	1.32	2.49	0.00	-0.06	-0.06	0	-4762	-2469
2016	1.26	1.35	2.61	1.21	1.36	2.56	0.05	-0.01	0.05	3968	-741	1916
2019	1.27	1.35	2.62	1.26	1.41	2.66	0.01	-0.06	-0.04	787	-4444	-1527
2021	1.33	1.41	2.74	1.28	1.44	2.72	0.05	-0.03	0.02	3759	-2128	730

Notes: With the exception of the last column, all figures are in crores. The figures for 2011 (row 3) are actual electors enumerated in census. The minus sign denotes under enumeration of the electors in the rolls. Figures in column 5 were estimated by dividing column 4 with column 2 and expressing them in lakhs.

Source: Column 2 is from the Election Commission; rest are estimated by the authors

A cursory glance on the table reveals that the rolls are bereft with both content and coverage errors posing grave concerns on its consistency. For instance, over a

three-year period (2016-2019), the EC has added only one lakh electors (2.61 crore to 2.62 crore) to the roll, and the addition was confined to male electors. However, going by the projected number of electors, the increase in electoral size is estimated to be 10 lakhs, with roughly equal number of additions in male and female electors. The increase in the size of electors in the census-based estimates is in tandem with the overall demographic transition trends of the state, and possibly reflects the number of potential voters who did not register to vote for obscure reasons. Such coverage errors reveal serious flaws in the roll modification process, which fail to account for the dynamics of age-structural changes in the state. The coverage errors have given way to content errors over the next three years (2019-2021). When the likely increase in the size of electors as per the projections based on census data is only 0.06 lakhs (2.66 crore to 2.72 crore), the number of electors on the rolls increased by 0.12 lakhs (2.62 crore to 2.74 crore).

This evidence demonstrates that the growth of electors estimated from the age structure of census does not commensurate with that of the rolls. Over a ten-year period, there was an addition of 13.3 percentage electors to the electors in 2011, according to census-based calculations. The increase in the size of the electors on the rolls, on the other hand, is estimated to be 18.1 percentage points for the aforementioned period. Similarly, the average annual exponential growth rate of electors in the census (1.3 percent) is significantly lower than the growth rate of enrolled voters (1.7 percent). This confirms the presence of over enumeration of electors.

The magnitude of under-enumeration or over-enumeration can be expressed in terms of the enrolment per lakh electors (column 5). Under-enumeration peaked at 3448 in 2001 and is least in 2019 with 1527. Similarly, there is an over-enumeration of 1916 voters in 2016 and 730 in 2021. It is evident from the table that barring two elections (2016 and 2021), there has been significant under count of electors. Based on 2011 census single year age returns, the number of people who are eligible to become electors but are not enrolled is estimated to be eight lakhs (seven lakh females and one lakh males). Such inconsistencies are surprising even when the census and elections are held in the same year. Even after accounting for people who intentionally do not enrol, the undercount of electors sheds light on the magnitude of discrepancies. Most importantly, the under enumeration of electors results in denial of their democratic rights as citizens, as a large number of eligible electors are left out of the periodic electoral roll revision normally carried out by the EC. In the 2014 election, the rolls for male electors were found to be in perfect order, with electors matching with their census cohorts.

Another source of grave concern is discrepancies in the rolls used for the local body elections and Assembly elections, despite the fact that electors remain the same. The EC is in charge of drafting the rolls and conducting elections for both the LA and the LS, whereas the State Election Commission (SEC), established under Articles 243 K and 243 ZA of the Constitution, is in charge of Panchayat Raj elections. The SEC registered 2.77 crore electors to vote in the elections in December 2020, while the EC registered 2.74 crore in April 2021. Three months after the local body elections, the EC rolls show a drop of close to three electors. Male electors have grown at a normal rate during this time, with an increase of one lakh electors in the EC estimates (1.33 crores) compared to the SEC estimates (1.32 crores). However, there has been an under count of three lakh female electors in the estimates of the

EC (1.41 crore) compared to estimates of SEC (1.44 crore). Despite differences in total electoral size, the projected female population tallies with the female electors on the SEC rolls.

As the basic unit of SLA/LS elections (assembly booths) are different, the SEC has devised a separate (ward-wise) roll from the rolls of EC used for the 2014 LS elections and has been using it for local body elections since 2015. These rolls have been updated, and it is now the responsibility of Panchayat and Municipal Electoral Registration Officers to revise the existing roll, which was used in the 2020 elections. Why does the SEC compile their rolls using the base year electoral population of a similar agency, whose data is muddled with errors? Although the goal of the SEC may be to reduce the cost of drafting the rolls, as an independent constituent body, it should have developed its own mechanisms for drafting and updating the rolls. The EC is in favour of creating a single voters list (recommended in 1999 and 2004) for all elections held in the country, and is now exploring the possibility of designing such a unified roll. Implementing a solo voters list system across the country not only reduces voter confusion (For instance, names appearing in one roll but not in the other), but it also improves roll accuracy by making better use of available resources in two departments.

### **Missing Female Electors: A Cause for Grave Concern**

Females have traditionally had higher demographic weights in the state, which is reflected in their electoral ages, resulting in females outnumbering male electors. The trends in the composition of electoral population (by both estimates) are in sync with the overall demographics of the state, as evidenced by the female friendly sex ratio of the population. In 2011 census, the overall sex ratio and the electoral sex ratio are 1084 and 1142 females per 1000 population, respectively. However, there were only 1090 female electors on the rolls for every 1000 male electors, implying a significant undercount of female electors on the rolls. The sex ratio of electors has steadily dwindled, falling from 1077 in 2014 to 1060 in 2021. The sex ratio of potential electors from the census estimates, on the other hand, is significantly higher than the electors and declined only from 1128 to 1125 during the period. As the gender gap in longevity widens, particularly in higher age groups (electoral age groups) it should favor females. As a result, the sex ratio of electors should have been higher and close to census-based sex ratio estimates. We have already evaluated the magnitude of female elector undercount in the 2011 rolls, as well as their continued stagnation over the three-year period from 2016 to 2019. Apart from longevity, migration trends and gender differentials in the enumeration of electors also influences the sex ratio of the voter population.

Gender differentials in enrollment of electors are largely neglected and hardly debated either in academic or in political circles. It is noted that a significantly lower size of female electors than their actual size is enumerated all through the elections (Column 4 of Table: 1). The state, which has relatively better indicators of gender equality, has failed in effectively enumerating its female electors. Going by the estimates of female under enumeration per lakh female electors, the highest was 5785 in 2011 and the lowest was 741 in 2016. The undercount of female electors in the recently concluded elections is estimated to be 2128 for every one lakh females. It is one of the serious issues that need further examination.

### Conclusion

The exercise uncovered the magnitude of discrepancies in the roll by considering the current demographic trajectories of electors in the state. The findings suggest that weeding out five lakh duplicate male electors and adding three lakh female electors would probably improve the purity of the rolls. This results in a net change of nearly two lakh electors from the rolls, which could significantly reduce anomalies in the rolls. In other words, for every one lakh electors enumerated in the rolls for the 2021 SLA elections, there was an excess of 730 electors. It reveals that close to 2128 female electors were under-enumerated, while 3759 male electors were over-enumerated per lakh electors in their respective categories. This means that without a massive electoral roll revision drive, the EC cannot ensure fair elections in the state. The current analysis lays a strong scientific support for the argument that the electoral roll contains multiple voters even after publishing the final rolls. At the same time, the under-enumeration of electors, particularly female electors, has not received the attention of the authorities that it deserved.

Recent controversies have centred on multiple entries of electors, including fake entries, holding bogus voter IDs, and registration of voters in more than one booth within the constituency and across constituencies within the state. The EC lacks scientific rigour in their approach in dealing with the roll intricacies, particularly in dealing with multiple entries and the exclusion of deceased electors. Because of their familiarity with changing electoral demographics, political parties may be aware of the quality of rolls used in elections. If a single party has dominance in a location, it is likely that their interference and the resulting fraudulent practices will lower the accuracy standards of that roll. On the other hand, when two or more political parties occupy the space on more or less equal footing, there is a higher likelihood that the rolls are likely to be accurate as they become more diligent while rolls are being updated. The intentions of the political parties are to gain undue voting advantage through such operations. Multiple vote casting is capable of sabotaging electoral outcomes in those constituencies that are in a neck-and-neck race. Allowing the electors to cast their franchise in more than one booth is tantamount to rigging the election process. Such electoral mechanisms scuttles every spirit of democracy.

Psephologists in the country generally believe that there are no consistent trends in voter turnout rates as it vary from election to election. A close examination of recent election trends indicates that more than three-quarters of its electors (77.10 percent) participated in the SLA elections in 2016 and the local body elections in 2020 (76.20 percent). However, voter turnout in the recently concluded election was only 74.06 percent, which is obviously lower than the rates reported in the preceding elections including the 2019 LS elections (77.84 percent). Due to the EC's initiatives in tracking duplicate electors in the electoral process, there could be a probable absence of multiple voting this time resulting in lower voter turnout rates. The EC, as the apex authority in charge of roll management, is responsible for ensuring that the roll contains only credible voters following each roll revision exercise. One of the major initiatives of the EC to clean up the stained roll was to link the name of the electors with their Aadhaar numbers known as National Electoral Roll Purification and Authentication Programme (NERPAP) rolled out in March 2015. The scheme, however, was temporarily suspended by the Supreme Court six months after its implementation. A recent Rajya Sabha bill (Election Law Bill 2022)

endorsed the process of linking voter IDs of the electors with their Aadhaar numbers. This method too cannot be said to be foolproof, as Aadhaar may contain both coverage and content errors. It is high time for the EC to think of devising novel ideas, such as incorporating biometric technologies into the electoral process to prevent riddles of multiple voting. These biometric systems have found widespread application in a variety of fields, including Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) schemes and Public Distribution System (PDS). However, such projects should be implemented only after consulting with political parties, the general public, and other election stakeholders and taking their feedback into consideration.

In countries such as the United Kingdom, voter registration data is more up to date than census data because it is revised annually and is even used as the base year population for redrawing the boundaries of the electoral constituencies (Handley 2015: 94). We should also learn from the experiences of such countries that have executed foolproof roll revision mechanisms adaptable to Indian conditions. Developing impeccably reliable roll revision mechanisms is advantageous in many ways, as it allows for a glimpse of the population at the ward or booth level. When census operations are halted due to pandemics or other reasons, having reliable estimates of a segment of the population is critical. Given the size of the electors and the magnitude of roll irregularities, it appears that only such initiatives can ensure the one-man, one-vote and one-value principle enshrined in India's Constitution.

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