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Democracy on the Ground: Efficiency and Strain among Booth Level Officers in India's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) Process

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Abstract
India's democratic vitality rests upon the integrity of its electoral processes. The Election Commission of India (ECI) periodically conducts Special Intensive Revisions (SIR) to ensure the accuracy and inclusiveness of voter rolls—an administrative task of immense scale and social importance. At the heart of this process are Booth Level Officers (BLOs), the frontline officials responsible for verifying voter data through extensive fieldwork and citizen engagement. This paper examines the efficiency, strain, and institutional pressures experienced by BLOs during the SIR 2026 initiative, situating their challenges within the broader framework of public-sector efficiency, public economics, and bureaucratic accountability. Drawing on theories of public goods, principal–agent models, X-inefficiency, and welfare economics, the essay examines how structural rigidity, limited incentives, and procedural demands impact BLO performance. The study argues that while public institutions, such as the ECI, prioritize fairness and inclusivity over speed and profit, their success depends on aligning institutional design with worker welfare. Ultimately, this essay calls for a rethinking of performance metrics in democratic governance—one that values not only procedural integrity but also the well-being of those who uphold it.

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I. Introduction

India's democracy, the largest in the world, relies on the meticulous maintenance of its electoral rolls to ensure that every eligible citizen can exercise the right to vote. The *Election Commission of India (ECI)*, as a constitutional authority, undertakes this responsibility through periodic *Special Intensive Revisions (SIR)* of voter lists. These revisions, aimed at ensuring accuracy, inclusion, and transparency, form the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. However, the process is far more than a technical update of data—it is a vast administrative endeavour that unfolds across the nation's most local levels.

At the center of this operation stand the *Booth Level Officers (BLOs)*—teachers, anganwadi workers, clerks, and other local officials who serve as the human link between the Election Commission and the electorate. Tasked with verifying voter details, conducting multiple household visits, and assisting citizens with registration and correction forms, BLOs embody democracy in action at the grassroots. Their work is both civic and logistical, demanding precision, patience, and accountability.

Yet, this essential democratic exercise also exposes the limits of public-sector efficiency. Unlike private-sector employees, BLOs operate under rigid administrative hierarchies, tight deadlines, and modest compensation. The pressures of the *SIR 2026*—including digital compliance requirements, public scrutiny, and accountability to multiple supervisory levels—have led to widespread reports of exhaustion and stress. Tragically, recent incidents in Gujarat, where some BLOs reportedly succumbed to heart attacks or took their own lives under intense workload pressure, have highlighted the human cost behind India's electoral machinery.

This essay investigates these dynamics by analyzing the efficiency and strain among Booth Level Officers during the SIR process. It draws upon theories of *public economics*—particularly public goods theory, principal–agent relations, X-inefficiency, and welfare economics—to interpret the institutional design and performance incentives shaping BLO outcomes. Through this lens, the study seeks to bridge administrative

practice and economic theory, demonstrating how the pursuit of procedural integrity can unintentionally produce human strain. The central argument advanced here is that democratic efficiency must extend beyond procedural accuracy to encompass the well-being of the people who sustain it.

II. Objectives of the study

1. To assess the efficiency of Booth Level Officers (BLOs) during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR 2026).
2. To identify key institutional and administrative pressures affecting BLO performance.
3. To examine how workload, incentives, and autonomy influence efficiency and motivation.
4. To apply public economics theories to explain the efficiency–strain dynamics among BLOs.
5. To suggest reforms for improving BLO welfare and institutional effectiveness.

III. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative-analytical research design, combining descriptive analysis of administrative practices with theoretical interpretation grounded in public economics and organizational theory. It seeks to explain patterns of efficiency, strain, and institutional behavior among BLOs through conceptual and empirical linkages. The research is exploratory and explanatory in nature—exploratory in mapping the operational and psychological challenges of BLOs, and explanatory in analyzing how public-sector structures affect these outcomes. The study relies extensively on official Election Commission of India (ECI) documents, media reports (e.g., NDTV, India Today, Business Standard, The Print, DD News), and academic literature from the fields of public economics, welfare theory, and bureaucratic management.

The research integrates multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret BLO experiences:

- Public Economics Lens: Examines the SIR as a public good and the free-rider problem inherent in electoral integrity.
- Principal–Agent Theory: Explores incentive misalignments between ECI (principal) and BLOs (agents).
- X-Inefficiency Theory: Assesses how bureaucratic rigidity undermines productivity and morale.
- Welfare Economics: Evaluates the human cost of administrative efficiency in public service.

IV. Scope and Limitations of the study

The study focuses on the SIR 2026 initiative and Booth Level Officers in India, which limits generalizability to other administrative contexts. The research primarily uses secondary data, and future empirical validation through field studies is recommended.

V. Review of Literature

The ECI's Special Intensive Revision (SIR): Scope and Significance

The ECI launched the *second phase* of SIR in late 2025 to clean and update the electoral rolls in 12 states and Union Territories, aiming to finalize the revised lists by *7 February 2026* (DD News, 2025). The exercise involves visiting every household multiple times, verifying voter eligibility, and resolving objections and claims (The Print, 2025). With approximately *533,000 BLOs* deployed, the SIR represents one of the largest decentralized data-verification projects in the world.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) serves as a critical instrument of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and inclusiveness of the electoral rolls. The SIR is conducted under the constitutional authority granted by Article 324 of the Constitution and the statutory framework of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. The primary role of SIR is to undertake a thorough, on-ground verification of electors with respect to a specific qualifying date—in this case, 01.01.2026. Unlike routine revisions, SIR involves deeper scrutiny, house-to-house enumeration, detailed verification with earlier SIR rolls, and structured participation of BLOs, EROs, AEROs, and state-level officers. Through this mechanism, the Commission ensures that the electoral roll is not just updated but also purified of inaccuracies, duplications, and demographic inconsistencies accumulated over time. The SIR process is

systematically scheduled across phases—preparation, enumeration, rationalization of polling stations, draft publication, claims and objections, notice phase, verification, and final publication—reflecting its comprehensive and structured design (Election Commission of India, 2025).

The significance of SIR becomes particularly evident in states and Union Territories where the last intensive revision was carried out decades ago, some as early as 2002 or 2003. During SIR, electors are verified through specially designed Modified Enumeration Forms and Declaration Forms that require cross-checking details of electors and their relatives with previous SIR rolls. This ensures authenticity and continuity of registration history. The role of SIR also extends to identifying electors whose Enumeration Forms are not returned and determining probable reasons such as death, migration, or duplication. These findings are publicly displayed at Panchayat and Urban Local Body offices, thereby fostering transparency and public scrutiny. Additionally, SIR has a proactive enrolment dimension: BLOs carry Form-6 and Declaration Forms during house visits and provide them to eligible individuals seeking fresh registration. This strengthens voter inclusion by reaching out to new electors, migrants, and unregistered eligible citizens at their doorstep (Election Commission of India, 2025).

SIR also holds administrative and institutional significance. It mandates that during the SIR period, key electoral posts such as ERO, AERO, and BLO must not remain vacant, ensuring uninterrupted functioning. It also binds state governments to provide manpower and resources to support the revision exercise. Further, SIR integrates Aadhaar-related instructions and provisions for advance applications for upcoming qualifying dates, illustrating its broader purpose of future-proofing the rolls. The notice phase enables EROs to verify mismatches or incomplete entries and request supporting documents. This process strengthens the legal compliance and evidentiary rigor of the electoral roll (Election Commission of India, 2025).

Ultimately, the Special Intensive Revision is indispensable for preserving the credibility of elections. Clean, accurate, and updated electoral rolls form the backbone of free and fair elections. By systematically removing errors, verifying identities, enhancing transparency, and enabling inclusive registration, SIR ensures that democratic participation is genuine, accessible, and legally sound. Through this process, the Election Commission reaffirms its constitutional mandate of conducting elections based on authentic and reliable voter lists.

The Role and Responsibilities of Booth Level Officers under SIR-2026

Booth Level Officers (BLOs) play a crucial frontline role in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, acting as the vital link between the Election Commission of India (ECI) and electors. During the SIR period, they are responsible for conducting house-to-house enumeration within the notified schedule, verifying elector details and ensuring the completeness and accuracy of data (India Today, 2025). They must identify probable causes—such as absent, shifted, deceased, or duplicate electors—whenever the Enumeration Forms are not returned, based on inquiries conducted with neighbouring electors. BLOs also help in preparing and displaying booth-wise lists of electors whose names do not figure in the draft roll, along with the probable reasons for such non-inclusion. These lists must be exhibited at important public offices such as Panchayat Bhavans, Urban Local Body offices, and Block or Panchayat administrative spaces to ensure transparency and public scrutiny. During their field visits, BLOs are mandated to carry at least thirty blank Form-6 and Declaration Forms to supply to individuals seeking new enrolment. They must use the Modified Enumeration and Declaration Forms specially introduced for the 2025 SIR, and strictly follow Aadhaar-related guidelines issued by the Commission. They must assist electors in checking their names and that of relatives in the previous SIR rolls through the official voter portal and provide guidance in filling the necessary forms (Election Commission of India, 2025).

In addition to fieldwork, BLOs hold significant verification responsibilities. They must thoroughly cross-check elector and family details in the Enumeration and Declaration Forms with the last SIR electoral roll data and authenticate them with their signature, certifying accuracy. Their role continues during the claims and objections period, where they support the Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and Assistant EROs in issuing notices, conducting verifications, and assisting in the disposal of claims. They contribute to ensuring the "health parameters" of electoral rolls—eliminating errors, ensuring consistency, and enabling preparedness for final publication. BLOs must maintain close coordination with supervisors, AEROs, and EROs throughout the SIR timeline, participating in the preparatory, training, enumeration, and verification phases. They also serve as the

first point of support for electors who need assistance regarding eligibility, shifting, citizenship declarations, or past registration details. Their responsibilities thus combine field verification duties, administrative compliance, citizen facilitation, and critical support to electoral authorities—ensuring that the electoral roll is robust, updated, transparent, and reflective of the eligible voting population (Election Commission of India, 2025).

Unlike private data operations, which often use technology and outsourcing to improve efficiency, the Election Commission of India (ECI) relies on human verification to ensure inclusivity and maintain public trust. This human-centered approach is not just procedural but philosophical: it aligns with the ECI's constitutional goal of *"ensuring every eligible citizen's inclusion."* However, this same commitment to procedural fairness and universality amplifies the workload and stress experienced by BLOs.

BLOs function as the grassroots representatives of the ECI in brief:

1. Conducting door-to-door verification of voters.
2. Identify absent/shifted/dead/duplicate electors.
3. Help prepare and display lists of non-included electors.
4. Verify all details in forms using last SIR rolls.
5. Provide Form-6 and Declaration Forms during visits.
6. Assist electors in checking their old SIR details.
7. Support ERO/AERO during claims, objections, and notice phase
8. Ensure accuracy and integrity of electoral rolls

Their work bridges the gap between the abstract goal of electoral integrity and the ground reality of administrative implementation. Yet, this role places them under multiple layers of pressure — institutional, procedural, digital, and social.

Institutional Pressures Faced by BLOs

(1) Strict Timelines and Administrative Rigor

The ECI operates under non-negotiable deadlines, working backward from national election schedules. BLOs must complete three rounds of house visits within limited timeframes, regardless of local constraints such as festivals, weather disruptions, or staff shortages (India Today, 2025). These rigid deadlines mirror the public sector's focus on procedural compliance rather than adaptive efficiency — a stark contrast to the flexibility common in private-sector project management.

(2) Workload Versus Compensation

Most BLOs perform these duties in addition to their primary employment. The *honorarium* offered by the ECI often fails to compensate for the extended fieldwork, administrative reporting, and public engagement required (DD News, 2025). This mismatch between workload and reward can lead to fatigue and diminished motivation — a problem rarely tolerated in performance-driven private firms.

(3) High Accountability with Limited Autonomy

BLOs are directly accountable for inaccuracies, omissions, or duplicate entries in voter lists. Errors can result in formal warnings or negative service record notations (NDTV, 2025). Yet, BLOs possess minimal discretion: they must follow standard operating procedures without the freedom to innovate or adapt locally. This *"high accountability–low autonomy"* paradox exemplifies the structural rigidity of the public sector.

(4) Digital and Technological Pressures

Recent SIR exercises integrate digital tools such as the *Election Manpower Management System (EMMS 2.0)*, GPS-based verification, and mobile apps for real-time reporting (NDTV, 2025). While these innovations improve transparency, they also impose technical burdens. Many BLOs, particularly in rural areas, struggle with

poor internet connectivity, smartphone limitations, and low digital literacy. Nonetheless, they remain accountable for timely digital submissions.

(5) Public and Political Pressures

Unlike private-sector employees, BLOs work within their own communities. They face pressure from local leaders, citizens dissatisfied with omissions, and political actors seeking influence. Mistakes or delays can trigger public criticism or allegations of bias. The combination of *administrative*, *social*, and *political* accountability makes BLOs' work uniquely stressful (The Print, 2025).

VI. Theoretical Lens — Public Economics and the Efficiency Dilemma

The pressures experienced by Booth Level Officers (BLOs) during the *Special Intensive Revision (SIR)* of electoral rolls can be interpreted through key theories of **public economics**, which explore how governments allocate resources and manage efficiency in the delivery of public goods.

1. Electoral Management as a Public Good

According to *Paul Samuelson's (1954) theory of public goods*, such goods are *non-excludable* and *non-rivalrous*, meaning individuals cannot be prevented from benefiting, and one person's use does not reduce availability for others. Free and fair elections — and by extension, *accurate electoral rolls* — fit this definition perfectly. Thus, the *Election Commission of India (ECI)* operates not for profit maximization but for the collective benefit of democratic legitimacy. However, this leads to a classic "free-rider problem", where citizens benefit from clean voter lists without contributing directly to the effort or cost of maintaining them. Consequently, the burden of ensuring electoral integrity falls on public officials like BLOs, whose contributions are often undervalued in economic terms.

2. Incentive Structures and Principal–Agent Theory

The *principal–agent model* (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) explains how inefficiencies arise when agents (public servants) have goals or constraints that diverge from those of principals (the government or citizens). In the SIR exercise, the *principal* (ECI) aims to maximize accuracy and inclusivity, while *agents* (BLOs) work within limited time, capacity, and incentives. The lack of performance-linked rewards or autonomy weakens alignment between the ECI's goals and BLO motivation. Private firms resolve such issues through contractual incentives and performance monitoring, whereas in the public sector, rigid hierarchies and limited fiscal flexibility exacerbate principal–agent gaps.

3. Public Choice Theory and Bureaucratic Behavior

Public choice theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962) views public officials as self-interested actors seeking to maximize personal benefit within institutional constraints.
In the context of SIR 2026, BLOs may comply with minimum procedural standards rather than exert discretionary effort, especially when honoraria are low and promotion opportunities minimal. This "minimum compliance" tendency reflects rational adaptation to misaligned incentives, not apathy — a key insight from public economics that explains performance gaps without moral judgment.

4. X-Inefficiency and Bureaucratic Constraints

Leibenstein's (1966) concept of *X-inefficiency* — inefficiency arising not from lack of resources but from poor organizational design — aptly describes the ECI's challenges.
Despite sufficient manpower, structural rigidity (multiple reporting levels, digital compliance, and lack of autonomy) produces *organizational slack*. In private firms, competition mitigates X-inefficiency; in public agencies, monopoly over service delivery and procedural rigidity sustain it. The result is performance pressure without proportional efficiency gain, as seen in BLO workloads and digital reporting bottlenecks.

Comparing BLO Performance and Private-Sector Efficiency

(1) Recruitment and Meritocracy

Private-sector firms typically recruit through market-driven competition, valuing skills, productivity, and adaptability. Selection is fast, flexible, and performance-oriented. In contrast, public-sector recruitment — even when merit-based through UPSC or PSC exams — is slow, constrained by reservation policies, and sometimes influenced by political interference.

However, BLOs are not recruited through competitive national exams; they are appointed temporarily from existing government staff. As such, their motivation and skill alignment may not match the specialized requirements of intensive field verification. This structure highlights a systemic issue: *public institutions often rely on generalist staff for specialist tasks.*

(2) Incentives and Motivation

Private firms employ direct performance-based incentives: bonuses, promotions, or penalties tied to measurable outcomes. Public institutions, on the other hand, rely on intrinsic motivation and civic duty. BLOs' incentives are largely symbolic — certificates or small honoraria — with little correlation between effort and reward. This weakens the performance-feedback loop crucial for sustained efficiency.

(3) Accountability Mechanisms

Private organizations maintain tight accountability through managerial oversight and market competition. Poor performers can be replaced swiftly. In contrast, BLO accountability is bureaucratic and diffused — mediated through EROs, supervisors, and administrative hierarchies. Corrective action, when taken, is slow and procedural rather than immediate or market-responsive (Business Standard, 2025).

(4) Autonomy and Innovation

Private-sector employees often enjoy the autonomy to innovate and optimize workflow. In the SIR process, however, BLOs must adhere strictly to ECI-prescribed formats and methods. Deviation risks disciplinary action, even if motivated by efficiency. Consequently, creativity and localized problem-solving are stifled.

(5) Workload Management

In the private sector, excessive workloads are typically mitigated through hiring, outsourcing, or technological automation. Public institutions, by contrast, operate within fixed staffing and budgetary constraints. BLOs' additional duties are layered on top of their regular employment responsibilities, intensifying stress and fatigue.

Institutional Rigidities and Bureaucratic Challenges

The BLO's experience reflects broader institutional issues affecting public-sector performance:

1. **Procedural rigidity**: Adherence to established rules ensures fairness but limits flexibility.
2. **Diffused accountability**: Responsibility spreads across hierarchies, diluting ownership.
3. **Slow decision-making**: Each procedural step requires approval, reducing responsiveness.
4. **Limited resource mobility**: Budgets, staff allocations, and technology use are tightly regulated.
5. **Cultural inertia**: Innovation is often discouraged in favour of procedural conformity.

Such institutional features ensure procedural justice — essential in a democracy — but undermine operational agility. In contrast, private organizations prioritize outcomes over processes, enabling rapid adaptation.

Reform Efforts and the ECI's Adaptive Measures

The ECI recognizes these challenges and has introduced reforms to improve efficiency and morale among BLOs:

- **Digital systems** such as EMMS 2.0 enhance staff deployment transparency.
- **Training modules** strengthen BLOs' understanding of digital tools and verification protocols.
- **Multiple rounds of visits** are designed to improve inclusivity and reduce errors.

- **Public awareness campaigns** reduce citizen resistance and improve cooperation.
- **Standardized honorarium guidelines** ensure uniform compensation across states.

While these initiatives demonstrate responsiveness, they remain within the framework of procedural control rather than structural reform. To enhance BLO performance meaningfully, the ECI — and by extension, the broader public sector — must institutionalize *performance-linked incentives*, *skill-based recruitment*, and *autonomy with accountability*.

Theoretical Perspective: Bureaucratic Rationality vs. Market Rationality

Sociologist Max Weber characterized bureaucracy as a system of rational-legal authority ensuring predictability and impartiality (Weber, 1947). The ECI's functioning epitomizes this model — structured, rule-bound, and impartial. However, market rationality — dominant in the private sector — values efficiency, adaptability, and profit maximization. BLOs' pressures thus emerge from the clash between bureaucratic rationality (process-driven) and market rationality (outcome-driven).

The ECI cannot operate purely on market rationality without compromising democratic integrity. The SIR's goals — inclusiveness, fairness, and accuracy — require procedural checks that inherently reduce speed and flexibility. Hence, comparing BLO performance with private-sector employees without considering their differing rationalities misrepresents both.

Pressure–Performance Dynamics: A Psychological View

Performance under pressure varies depending on task complexity, incentives, and autonomy. Research in organizational psychology suggests that *moderate stress* enhances focus and productivity, while *excessive stress* leads to burnout and errors (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). BLOs' work environment often crosses into the latter category due to conflicting demands: strict deadlines, low rewards, digital challenges, and public scrutiny.

Moreover, unlike private-sector employees who can negotiate workloads or escalate grievances through HR channels, BLOs operate within hierarchical administrative chains, limiting recourse. This structural inflexibility amplifies pressure while diminishing intrinsic motivation.

VII.Suggestions for Improvement

The analysis of BLO performance during SIR 2026 offers broader lessons for improving public-sector efficiency:

1. **Transparent, Skill-Oriented Recruitment:** Introduce specialized training and certification for election staff, rather than relying on general government employees.
2. **Performance-Linked Incentives:** Implement measurable indicators (accuracy, timeliness, citizen satisfaction) tied to compensation.
3. **Autonomy with Accountability:** Empower BLOs with localized discretion within broad procedural guidelines.
4. **Digital Support Infrastructure:** Strengthen connectivity and user-friendly platforms to ease digital compliance.
5. **Workload Rationalization:** Limit the number of households per BLO and introduce support staff during intensive phases.
6. **Continuous Capacity Building:** Offer regular digital literacy and communication training.
7. **Avoid Using Teachers alone as BLOs:** Diversify BLO appointments across different departments instead of burdening school teachers repeatedly.
8. **Strengthen Digital Public Participation:** Make online claims/objections stronger and easier, reducing physical footwork for BLOs.

Such reforms can bridge the gap between public purpose and performance efficiency, aligning the ECI's institutional strengths with contemporary management practices.

VIII. Conclusion

The *Special Intensive Revision (SIR 2026)* by the Election Commission of India represents not only a logistical achievement but also a microcosm of public-sector functioning. Through the experience of Booth Level Officers, we observe how institutional design — rather than individual merit — shapes performance outcomes. BLOs work under high pressure, low incentive, and limited autonomy, yet their collective effort sustains India's democratic foundation.

While private-sector models emphasize efficiency through competition and profit, public-sector institutions like the ECI pursue *efficiency through equity and accountability*. Their performance cannot be measured by speed or profitability alone but by inclusiveness, transparency, and legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the public sector can draw valuable lessons from private-sector practices: clear performance metrics, merit-based recruitment, and adaptive autonomy. By embedding these reforms without compromising its democratic ethos, the ECI — and similar institutions — can enhance both performance and public trust.

Ultimately, the success of SIR 2026 will not be measured solely in corrected voter rolls but in the sustained credibility of the world's largest democracy — a credibility upheld daily by the diligence and endurance of its Booth Level Officers.

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