



INFO PACK

Indian General Elections 2019

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Overview

The 2019 Indian Elections are considered as one of the most important in Indian history. Nearly 900 million registered voters will be eligible to participate in the world's largest democratic exercise to select representatives for the lower house of the parliament, also known as the Lok Sabha.

Candidates from various parties will contest a total of 543, and are required to secure a minimum of 272 seats to form a majority government. If broken down, each MP represents 1.5 million voters. With 29 states and 7 union territories, the size of each constituency is proportional to the state population. For instance, the state of Uttar Pradesh is the biggest in the country and has a total of 80 constituencies. The entire election cycle consists of 7 phases, starting on the 11th of April and ending on the 19th of May with vote counting taking place on the 23rd of May.

During the previous election cycle in 2014, 8,250 candidates were registered from a total of 464 parties.

2014 marked a significant moment in modern Indian political history as the Bharatiya Janta Party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, secured an outright majority with 282 seats, a feat no party has accomplished since 1984.

It is noteworthy that the BJP's win in the previous cycle was a result of India's fractured political mandates and the rising unpopularity of the Congress and its allies, known as the Union Progressive Alliance. As Narendra Modi crusaded on platform of development and governance, it also pursued a Hindu nationalist discourse, expanding its footprint in the electoral race.

Five years on, the electoral outcomes this time around will significantly shape the future of the world's largest democracy and its 1.3 billion people. Under Modi's leadership, India has become an example of the rise of divisive politics, with heightened anti-minority rhetoric (namely against Muslims and Dalits) playing a significant role in mainstream political discourse.. Backlash against this approach, along with the revival of the Rahul Gandhi led Congress Party, may galvanize an anti-BJP voter base, thereby potentially challenging the BJP's majority status.



(Stringer - AA)

The Process

- The Election Commission of India has absolute power to supervise, control and conduct the process.
- There are approximately 900 million registered voters according to the Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora.
- The total number of polling stations are approximated to be 1 million.
- The election process is divided into 7 phases, beginning on the 11th of April and ending on the 19th of May.
- The Indian parliament consists of two houses: The House of States (Rajya Sabha) and the House of People (Lok Sabha), known as the upper and the lower house respectively.
- Vote counting will take place on the 23rd of May.
- During the elections, people elect representatives for the lower house of parliament.
- The members of the Lok Sabha are elected through the first-past-the-post system (FPTP), in which the candidate with the highest number of votes in a constituency wins a seat in the parliament.
- The Lok Sabha consists of 545 members. 530 members are directly elected from the States and 13 from Union Territories. With 2 members being nominated by the President to represent the Anglo-Indian community.

ELECTIONS IN INDIA BY THE NUMBERS

India's general election will take place in seven phases from April 11 to May 19.

Votes will be counted on May 23.

900 Million is the number of eligible voters, the world's largest ever

8,250 candidates from 464 parties contested the 2014 election

\$5bn is estimated to have been spent for the 2014 election. It is expected to double this year (\$6.5bn was spent on the 2016 US election)

170m is India's Muslim population, the world's third largest. Many of them say they have become an invisible minority under the Hindu nationalist BJP

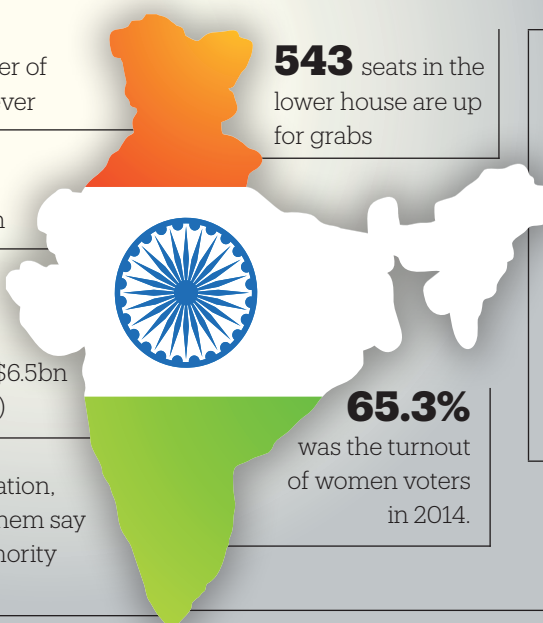
543 seats in the lower house are up for grabs

272 is the majority needed to form a government

66% was the turnout in the 2014 election, up from 45% in 1951, when the first election was held

65.3% was the turnout of women voters in 2014.

67.1% for men



Main Actors

Narendra Modi (Bharatiya Janta Party)



(Stringer- AA)

The Bharatiya Janta Party was officially formed in 1980 under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K Advani. Before its formation, both founders were also members of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) the political extension of the right-wing Hindu cultural organization Rashtriya Swamayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which advocates a Hindu nationalist agenda under the banner of Hindutva.

In 2014, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the party secured an electoral majority by winning 282 seats out of 543, becoming the first non-Congress party to form a government without requiring a coalition.

Rahul Gandhi (Indian National Congress)

Congress is one of the oldest political parties in India. Formed in 1885, it is one of the leading parties that forced an end to British Rule in 1947. The party is mostly dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi family and dominated the Indian political space with its United Progressive Alliance until 2014 when it won a record low of 44 parliamentary seats.

Currently, the INC is led by Rahul Gandhi whose grandmother was Indira Gandhi, a long-term Indian Prime Minister and grandfather was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of an independent India.

In past decades, the INC's image has been damaged by corruption scandals and inconsistent leadership. However, recently Rahul Gandhi has come out as an opposing force by developing consistency in its rhetoric and strategy. Throughout the year 2018, the Congress party has demonstrated its resurgence, defeating Modi's BJP in the Hindi-heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh.

The defeat shook the BJP and reflects the increased legitimacy Congress' leadership appears to have with the electorate. Therefore, posing a well-adjusted opposition in a contest to win a majority in the Lok Sabha.



(Amit Dave/REUTERS)

What will Drive the Election Race?

Modi's Rhetoric on National Security

In 2014, Modi promised nation-wide economic development (using his home state of Gujarat as an example) development and good governance. Being a protégé of the RSS, he was able to successfully mobilize the pro-Hindu nationalist voter base.

Five years on things are different. India has witnessed shifts in its political and economic landscapes. The economy has slowed down, farmers are marching in protest and the unemployment rate is the highest since 1972/73 according to an assessment by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Also, losing three Hindi-heartland states during local elections represented a significant setback for the BJP.

However, the recent attack in the Pulwama district of the Indian occupied Kashmir which led India and Pakistan to the brink of war has also led to a rejuvenation of Modi's election prospects. Analysts argue that following the attack, Modi has strategically implemented the rhetoric of "national security" to mobilize voters in his party's favour,

with a particular focus on the Hindu nationalist base.. The issue seems to play in Modi's favour as observed when he inaugurated his campaign in Meerut in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, as observed through his campaigns, the national security rhetoric positions Modi as a strong, decisive leader who can protect the country from threats..

On the other hand, the opposition lead by Rahul Gandhi is spearheading its election narrative on the failures of the BJP. It's putting more emphasis on pragmatic issues such as economic improvement. Pledging to tackle unemployment, waiving farm loans and to provide more job opportunities to women, Congress is ambitiously aiming to eliminate poverty by the year 2030. Similarly, Rahul Gandhi's proposal for a universal income plan would to provide 20% of poor families across the country with an annual income of 72,000 rupees (\$1,046 USD). As a counter-argument towards BJP's hardline Hindu nationalistic rhetoric, Rahul Gandhi is advocating to protect India's secular integrity and challenging Modi on the issues of corruption, divisive politics and national security.



(Amit Dave/REUTERS)

Jobless Growth and the Economy

Recently, the Indian economy has experienced a decline. As it stands today, the growth is down to 6.6% from the 7.1% recorded in the last quarter. In a country of 1.3 billion people, there are a million job seekers per month, and unemployment is now the highest in the past 40 years. Although the GDP growth is expected to be 6.8% this fiscal year, the phenomenon of jobless growth remains at large and the overall exports have dropped, widening the trade deficit to \$165 billion since 2012-2013.

In 2016, the BJP introduced a demonetization scheme to remove unaccounted for money circulating in the black market (known as black money) aiming to curb corruption. The implementation of the policy, came with major setbacks especially amongst low income and middle business owners. Correspondingly, the implementation of

the Goods and Services Tax compounded the problem further, overwhelming the burden on the economic situation¹.



The Farmers Vote

Almost 55 percent of India's population is involved in the agricultural sector, making farming an essential activity for the country's socio-economic development. With 260 million in numbers, farmers represent one of the key voting blocs in the electoral race during the general elections.

Farmer distress and suicides have been a recurring factor in India for decades. Even as the GDP to farm sector ratio has declined over the decades, the sector still contributes to 17% to the GDP and remains a major source of employment. Therefore, facing constant income insecurity, farmers in India are constantly ridden by drought, collapsing prices due to high imports, failed schemes, archaic laws and lack of farming technology².

The situation facing farmers has led to strikes and protests, with farmers spilling milk and onions in streets, holding dead rats in their mouths and wearing skulls to advocate for those among them who have committed suicide. Modi's demonetization and goods and service tax (GST) is one of the key reasons behind their distress in recent

years. Demonetisation has made it harder for farmers to purchase seeds before the farming season, and the GST reduced their incomes since the taxes were also imposed on agricultural material such as fertilizers, pesticides and fuel.

Understanding the importance of the farmers' vote, the BJP government has announced schemes designed to improve the situation for the agricultural sector, promising to double incomes by 2022 and paying 6000 Indian Rupees (\$87 USD) a year to help farmers with holdings of land less than two hectares.

These plans have been criticized by the opposition as being nothing more than an attempt at "buying the vote" prior to the elections. On a related note, following the electoral success of the Congress Party in the Hindi speaking states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh in December, they fulfilled their campaign promises after the victory by offering farmers loan waivers, which could play well for them in the upcoming vote.

¹ For more on these policies, read: <https://scroll.in/latest/911614/unemployment-after-demonetisation-and-gst-even-worse-than-headline-numbers-suggest-says-report>

² For more on the Indian farmers, refer to: <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2019/01/21/why-are-indian-farmers-angry>

Energizing the Female Vote

There are 432 million women voters in India. Recently, there has been an increase in women's participation in India's political space. Throughout the past decades, the female voter turnout has been increasing, shrinking the voter gender gap. Women's turnout in the last electoral race for the Lok Sabha was 65% as compared to men's 67%.

The increase in women voter's mobilization is reflective of a remarkable trend in Indian politics. Understanding the increasing importance of women voters, the leading candidates from the BJP and Congress have correspondingly adapted strategies that intend to target the growing electoral power of the female demographic.

Rahul Gandhi's Congress has promised to reserve a third of federal government jobs for women. Congress is also promising to set up an investigative unit to monitor crimes against women.

Similarly, Narendra Modi has been campaigning to woo the women vote as well. While dedicating an entire chapter in his manifesto towards women empowerment, the BJP is promising to improve women's participation in the workforce and offering nurseries at the workplace to provide flexible and accessible childcare services.



(Adnan Abidi/REUTERS)

Social Media and Disinformation

The spread of disinformation in online social media platforms has been one of the grave concerns amongst experts leading up to the Indian election. One of the core events in the run-up to the elections, which anchored the relationship between disinformation and it endangering India's election was the recent attack in Indian occupied Kashmir. False information claiming that the Congress party promised large sums of money to the attackers family and free the terrorists painted the BJP's main opposition in a negative light, while giving ammunition to Modi's national security rhetoric.

Information wars in India remain a looming phenomenon. The spread of fake news and divisive propaganda remain as a significant factor in shaping public opinion. Misinformation and divisive agendas run by political parties not only target their political opponents, but also

different segments of the society: namely journalists, women, and the minorities.

With false information widespread with accounts associated with the BJP and the Congress, social media networks (especially Facebook with its 340 million users) and the messaging service of WhatsApp are trying to cope with disinformation and hate speech.

It is noteworthy, that Narendra Modi's win back in 2014 has made him one of the most influential online politicians becoming the 2nd most liked politician on social media after President Barrack Obama. It is no surprise, that most of his agenda and image has been anchored through the influence of the social media platform. It is estimated that 1.2 million volunteers will run the BJP party's social media campaign for the national elections.

The Question of the Minority Vote

Narendra Modi's hardline Hindu nationalism has been the centerpiece of the discussion ever since his coming to power in 2014. The deployment of Hindu nationalist rhetoric based on a premise that sees India as being a Hindu nation, mob violence, with increasing assaults against the Dalits and the Muslims, have made international headlines throughout Modi's tenure.

According to Factchecker.in, there have been 168 attacks by Hindu extremists in the name of protecting cows, killing 46 people. As the attacks against Muslims remain energized, right-wing groups and organizations behind these attacks have gained greater legitimacy in recent years.

Another minority that has faced constant oppression has been the Dalits (who represent a voter block of nearly 100 million). The Dalits are the lowest caste in India's caste hierarchy system and have faced constant oppression as Modi's political sphere favours the upper castes.

In a similar respect, experts argue that the discourse around voter suppression

and eligible voters missing from the voters list is hardly discussed in Indian politics. To address this problem, an app called "Missing voters" was created in order to enroll disenfranchised voters in the country. Its creator argues that Among 120 million 'missing voters', 70 million are Dalits and Muslims³. The issue of voter disenfranchisement has the potential to raise doubts regarding the fairness of the election process.



(Amit Dave/REUTERS)

³ For more on missing voters app: <http://www.missingvoters.in/>

EXPERT VIEWS



Mehboob Jeelani

Senior Editor at TRT World

He has previously covered Indian politics for several publications including *The Caravan*, *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera* and others.

Narendra Modi's rhetoric to cultivate support

The ruling party's rhetoric has gotten shrill. Prime Minister Modi is using the longstanding Kashmir conflict and India's animosity with Pakistan to cultivate support. He has also launched a crackdown against the pro-freedom politicians of India-held Kashmir, arresting them and raiding their homes. Besides, the killings of civilians in the region have multiplied in the past few months. Recently, a school teacher was killed in custody, and draconian measures like banning vehicular traffic on the lone highway of Kashmir twice a week and detaining people without trials have made things extremely difficult for Kashmiris.

But outside Kashmir, such policies have generated support and appreciation for Modi since a significant majority of Indians, precisely Hindu nationalists, see Kashmiri-bashing as a sign of strong leadership. Modi is simply trying to keep them happy. Many experts argue that for Modi, the only way to distract Indians from his economic failures is to whip up anti-Pakistan sentiment and be hard on Kashmiri people, and also maintain his silence on mob attacks in the name of protecting Hindu religion that has killed several dozen Indian Muslims.

The "soft Hindutva" discourse of Congress

To counter the chest-thumping nationalism, which is largely driven by the idea of gaining Hindu supremacy, the main opposition party, the Congress, are campaigning on Modi's economic failures, farmers distress and sluggish job growth. They are also trying to corner the ruling BJP on the question of women empowerment and 'destroying' India's secular fabric. But at the same time, many Congress politicians are playing the card of "soft Hindutva," which means pursuing the politics of Hindu supremacy but in a subtle manner.

Modi's failure: Dented economy and corruption

Like in previous elections, the economy and the issues like high-interest rates, the ease of doing business, farmers debt, income inequality, slow job growth, inflation, staggering GDP, all these things matter to a regular Indian voter. Therefore, in 2014, a lot of Indians, who do not necessarily believe in schooling the minorities through violence, voted for Modi. Why? He convinced them the previous government led by Congress was involved in the scourge of corruption, blaming the party for their bad economic conditions.

But five years down the line, the corruption remains in the government ranks. Many BJP politicians are accused of multimillion-dollar financial scandals, and in the recent past even Prime Minister Modi's Rafale deal with French government came under a severe scrutiny. The country's top court has called for an investigation, smelling foul play in the \$11.8 billion deal.

As far as economic measures, Modi's radical demonetisation came as a major blow to almost every poor and middle class Indian. The shortage of cash in the market proved fatal for small and medium businesses, while poor farmers were left cashless for several months, adding to their distress.

Modi has been stubborn when it comes to accepting his mistakes or offering a way forward. He's like a walking hologram constantly talking to his subjects and unwilling to take questions. He's been criticised for not having a single press conference since coming to power. And most of the Indian media has made peace with that, even downplaying his failures and justifying his actions through feeble explanations.



Anchal Vohra

Senior Indian journalist
covering South Asia and
Middle East

The main election narratives of the BJP and the Congress

In the last general elections, BJP came to power with the promise of development. This time, the narrative has changed to offering assurances on national security. The BJP is advertising Prime Minister Modi as a strong man candidate, someone who can deal with Pakistan and terrorism emanating out of there. The BJP, including the PM himself, are using the Pulwama attack to garner votes. When asked to provide proof for the claims on the strike in Pakistan, such as, evidence of how many killed, the government is refusing to provide clear answers and instead targeting those asking these questions, calling them suspicious of the Indian armed forces. That is preposterous. It is not as if before the BJP, the armed forces were not appreciated. The BJP government simply does not want to answer any critical questions.

Meanwhile, Rahul Gandhi is trying to capitalize on the failures of the Modi government, as opposition parties do. Mr. Gandhi is trying to appease the poorest of Indians, who also go out and vote in bigger numbers than the relatively wealthier do. He has announced to deposit 6000 rupees a month in the bank account of 5 crore Indian households, however, he has not yet clarified where will this money come from?

India's foreign policy on Kashmir and Pakistan

Pakistan always claims it wants to pursue a dialogue, but they have to show that they are serious about tackling anti-India terrorist groups, specifically by arresting them and ensuring that they can not operate against India from Pakistan. While on one hand, India must reach out to the Kashmiri people. Kashmiris are Indians, their own people. The only policy that can work in Kashmir is winning hearts and minds and not PM Modi's highhandedness as he has shown in his tenure.



Reetika Khera

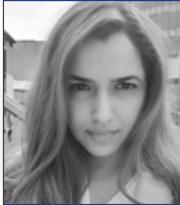
Associate Professor,
Indian Institute of
Management, Ahmedabad

Social and economic populism

What counts as populism needs further scrutiny - by international standards, India spends too little on the social sector (health, education and social security). Also by international standards, the income tax base and marginal rates of taxation are low in India. I believe that it is possible for the Indian government to raise its social spending on basic services without being fiscally irresponsible. I think that any focus on people's issues ahead of the elections is very welcome.

What should be the policy of the winning party be to get rid of unemployment?

I believe that we need to focus harder on both generation of work opportunities as well as provision of social support for bad times. As is implicit in your question, I do not that it is a question of either social support or focus on employment. For instance, if the government were to increase its spending on health by hiring more nurses, that would create more jobs as well as improving public health services for the poor.



Zainab Sikander

Political Observer

She appears in political debates & also writes on Indian politics.
She's currently writing her first novel.

The importance of women's vote

There are roughly 48% women in India, 940 females to 1000 males according to the 2011 Census. Making women an equal stakeholder as men in Indian polity. However, women's issues are rarely discussed and those that are brought up are hardly considered. For eg: The law on marital rape. Besides that, the Women's Amendment Bill which seeks to ensure political representation of women in India by reserving one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the state legislative assemblies have been pending in Parliament for the past 8 years.

The BJP led central government had mentioned that they would pass this bill in their 2014 manifesto but it has been in limbo in their government too. It is for reasons like these that women are trying to assert their political right by trying to engage either passively (by simply turning up to vote) or actively (by being a part of the political system either as a politician or a bureaucrat) so that their voices become relevant.

Congress and Priyanka Gandhi's entry: What does it signify?

Priyanka Gandhi's entry in politics has been well-timed as Congress needs a great revival in Uttar Pradesh. As far as her significance in politics is concerned, she has been brought in especially because of the perception she brings along with herself. She reminds people of her grandmother, former PM of India, Indira Gandhi. The perception is so strong that propaganda machinery working against her are peddling bizarre claims that she underwent surgeries to look like her grandmother. However, what remains significant in all of this is that Indira Gandhi is still memorable and it's an advantage that Priyanka Gandhi carries in terms of likability and connect.

BJP and their schemes on women empowerment

BJP is rolling out schemes like Ujjwala Yojana for women that provides LPG connections to women from Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. Firstly as a woman, I find it offensive that providing LPG connections is considered as an incentive to women, as it simply perpetuates misogyny - that a woman should be in the kitchen bound cooking for the family.

They also brought in the abolition of the Instant Triple Talaq which they turned into a criminal offense. Although it was a much-appreciated effort on the part of the BJP led government, most Muslims had reservations about the fact that the Triple Talaq Bill could be misused as they had made divorcing through instant triple talaq a penal offense which would attract a jail term of three years for the husband. To allay these fears, the government changed the bill by adding a provision of bail for the accused before the trial.

What should the policy preferences on women be for the winning party

The policy preference should focus on social reform. Women, who for years have been fettered by patriarchal norms need to be educated, emancipated and included within all spheres of Indian polity, formal economy, skill & development centres. There should be an introduction of paid paternity and maternity leave so that a newborn can be taken care of both by the father and the mother. 'Anganwadi' workers who run health awareness programs & pre-school activities for children in villages need to be paid better and given better facilities. Cases of sexual harassment, especially against those in the government, should be dealt with immediately. Most importantly, the Women's Reservation Bill must certainly be passed.

