

India's 2019 National Elections: A Preview

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Related Author

- [K. Alan Kronstadt](#)
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K. Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs (akronstadt@crs.loc.gov, 7-5415)

Overview

India, a populous South Asian federal republic, is about to undertake the largest democratic exercise in human history in seating a new lower house of Parliament, the 545-seat Lok Sabha. The [numbers](#) involved can inspire awe: there are 880 million eligible voters in the country's 29 states and 7 union territories. Five phases of voting will begin on April 11; results are due May 23. The last polls in 2014 saw about 540 million voters choose from among more than 8,250 candidates representing 464 parties. Incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP or "Indian People's Party") aspire to win another five-year term with a ruling majority. The Indian National Congress party (hereinafter "Congress Party")—historically dominant, but badly defeated in 2014—seeks to build on recent [state-level wins](#) and potentially ally with [powerful regional opposition parties](#) to dislodge the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in New Delhi. (For an overview of India's current political setting, see [IF10298](#).)

Many observers see the upcoming election as an inflection point in Indian history. BJP's 2014 win, with 52% of Lok Sabha seats, marked an end to 30 years of coalition politics at the national level. A repeat performance could thus herald [a new era](#) of single-party dominance. Perhaps more crucially, the election pits an unabashedly Hindu nationalist prime minister and ruling party against an array of more secular-minded parties, some focused on the interests of India's large lower-caste and Muslim minorities. Secularism has been a more-or-less enshrined value in India, although its conception in both theory and practice varies widely. Indian voters may face a landmark choice between [two overarching identities](#) for their country: one, a pluralist, secular polity where religious minorities enjoy full equality; the other, a nation in which roughly 250 million non-Hindu citizens must accept [Hindu majoritarianism](#), with potentially [dire consequences](#) for India's [civil liberties](#).

The Modi/BJP Record

Narendra Modi won office promising to emphasize development and good governance, while downplaying emotive religious and cultural issues. BJP's parliamentary majority was gained with only 31% of total votes, but Modi enjoyed immense popularity in the early years of his term—one 2017 [survey](#) found his approval rating at 88%. The party went on to sweep several major state-level elections, most notably in north-central Uttar Pradesh, India's Hindi-speaking heartland, where more than 200 million citizens are represented with 80 Lok Sabha seats. As recently as mid-2018, Modi and his party were being called "[unbeatable](#)," but subsequent developments altered this outlook.

India's [economic growth](#) has averaged around 7% annually since 2014, about the same as the NDA's predecessor and well below that needed to absorb as many as 10 million Indians entering the labor force [each year](#). Leaked Indian government [data](#), which was called "preliminary" and may be revised, put the country's unemployment rate at 6.1% for

2017/2018, a 45-year high. Rising joblessness, along with low farm income, "[demonetization](#)" damage, an increased incidence of [hate crimes](#) against minority groups, [corruption](#) allegations, and rampant [alienation](#) in the Kashmir Valley have combined to cloud Modi/BJP fortunes. An early 2019 [poll](#) put Modi's approval rating at 46%.

Rising Hindu Nationalism

BJP was born as the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ([RSS](#) or "National Volunteer Organization"), a [hardline](#) Hindu nationalist and social service group with millions of members. Prime Minister Modi is a lifelong RSS member, as are many of his top lieutenants. As purveyors of "[Hindutva](#)" ideology, RSS activists seek to situate their religion at the core of Indian nationalism, leaving non-Hindu Indians to face varying degrees of discrimination, some of it legally sanctioned. Since 2014, the incidence of such discrimination has [increased](#), including through "cow protection" vigilantism and "forced conversions," alarming proponents of human [rights](#) and [freedoms](#). Given weak economic performance, the BJP-led government [arguably](#) is [seeking](#) to generate voter enthusiasm through Hindu identity.

Opposition Efforts

Congress Party chief Rahul Gandhi is the inheritor of a family dynasty that includes three past prime ministers. He has the [highest profile](#) among potential leaders of an opposition coalition, even as his party [conveys respect](#) for the aspirations of regional party leaders. Modi has become the primary, if not sole target of the opposition, but no individual challenger has emerged. Still, the opposition's zeal to oust the NDA has led to some unusual alliances. In January, the leaders of two powerful Uttar Pradesh-based parties [agreed](#) to set aside their bitter rivalry to cooperate in defeating the BJP. Other influential regional parties are maneuvering toward a potential opposition "[grand alliance](#)."

Foreign Affairs

Foreign policy issues are typically of low priority for Indian voters. Modi has won [plaudits](#) for successfully [projecting](#) India as the globe's next big economic opportunity, while many [critics](#) say he lacks a coherent strategic vision and has squandered an opportunity to make India a great power. The February 2019 [bombing](#) in Kashmir, blamed on a Pakistan-based terrorist group, and an unprecedented retaliatory [airstrike](#) on Pakistani territory, pushed foreign affairs into the headlines and triggered a sharp spike of Indian nationalism that is widely [expected](#) to benefit the incumbent BJP.

Congressional Interest

The 14-year-old U.S.-India [strategic partnership](#) was co-launched by a Congress Party-led coalition government, and the trend toward closer bilateral ties most likely will continue regardless of a leadership change in New Delhi. That said, many analysts contend that Modi and the BJP have been and would continue to be more open to aligning with U.S. regional strategy—perhaps especially that seeking to [balance](#) against growing Chinese influence—and more energetic in pursuing [economic reforms](#) than would be any likely alternative Indian leadership. Coalition governments are sometimes faulted for instability, but they may also compel leaders to negotiate and take account of a wider variety of perspectives, while secure majority governments can lead to [complacency and arrogance](#). To the extent that [U.S. officials](#) and Members of [Congress](#) emphasize [human rights violations](#) and the sturdiness of civil and democratic [institutions](#) in India (and globally), a continuation of the BJP-led administration could entail an unwelcome continuation of its perceived illiberal policies.