

FP's Guide to the Indian Elections

Will voters give Narendra Modi another chance?

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Between April 11 and May 19, some 900 million Indians will get the chance to elect a new parliament and, in turn, a new prime minister. The rolling contest, which is widely seen as a referendum on sitting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, **has faced some hiccups**. Voting was temporarily canceled in one constituency in the southern state of Tamil Nadu after accusations that a regional party had distributed cash to voters. And several political leaders from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been suspended from campaigning for breaking electoral rules. But with millions of ballots already cast, the election is still set to become the world's largest-ever exercise in democracy.

To help explain the stakes, we've gathered our top reads on India's democracy, the main parties contesting the vote, and where the country goes from here.

Bruce Stokes, an associate fellow at Chatham House, **sets the scene** with a report card on the government's performance over the last five years. "The ratio of Indians who believe the country's economic condition is good has fallen by 27 points—from 83 percent in 2017 to 56 percent in 2018," he writes. More worrying, "only 54 percent of Indians are satisfied with the way their democracy is working, down significantly from 79 percent in 2017." Finally, Stokes points out, "58 percent of the Indian public say no matter who wins an election, things do not change very much" and "only 33 percent of Indian adults believe elected officials care what ordinary people think."

A further problem, **writes** the journalist Soumya Shankar, is voter suppression. According to Missing Voters, an app created in 2018, "nearly 120 million eligible voters could be missing from voter lists, nearly 70 million of whom could be Muslims and Dalits." Indeed, Shankar warns, "suppression appears to chiefly target Muslims, who make up around 13 percent of the population and are frequent targets of Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist [BJP], and Dalits, the lowest group in the caste system," but 21 million eligible women could be disenfranchised as well. Without their votes, Shankar asks, "can the upcoming general elections be termed free?"

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Free or not, heading into the vote, the BJP and Modi appeared to lead the race. But he's a different man than the one who campaigned the last time around, **argues** the investor and author Ruchir Sharma. He's no longer the politician who "promised a clear break with India's socialist traditions, campaigning on a promise of 'minimum government, maximum governance'—a streamlined administration that would not interfere in the private sector." Modi has become "a performer, not a reformer," one top U.S. diplomat told Sharma, who adds, "and by performer he did not mean showman. He meant micromanager, focused on executing fixes to one problem at a time rather than reducing the overbearing role of the government in the economy."

Srinivas Thiruvadhanthai of the Jerome Levy Forecasting Center **thinks** much of the criticism directed at Modi's economic performance is unfair. In particular, although Modi is accused of abandoning reform to embrace populism, the prime minister may be more constrained than observers realize. "[I]t makes little sense to judge Modi on his approach to state-owned businesses and tariffs alone," Thiruvadhanthai argues. "Not only have reforms in those fields arguably reached a point of diminishing returns, but such an outlook also ignores a wider set of policies that foster a healthy market-oriented economy." In fact, "[i]n a democracy like India's, where the poor come out to vote in large numbers, no administration can afford to ignore the concerns that fuel populist impulses. ... Reforms can't be endured if the benefits don't reach the masses."

The BJP and Modi's record may be mixed, but their main competitor, the Indian National Congress, fares no better. "It's been a dark four and a half years for India's main opposition party, the Indian National Congress," **notes** Milan Vaishnav, the South Asia program director at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "After getting trounced in the 2014 general elections ... the Congress headed into a protracted downward spiral." By last year, the party controlled only three state governments (compared with the BJP's 20), and "[t]he heir to the once-storied Congress dynasty, Rahul Gandhi, became the butt of every Twitter meme and WhatsApp joke—an erratic dilettante whose gaffes were as frequent as his long, unexplained trips abroad."

The party's solution? Unveiling a new senior leader: Priyanka Gandhi, just weeks before the start of the election. Vaishnav **explains** the move in a separate piece: "[T]he Priyanka Gandhi play is not only about winning allies and lifting spirits; it's also about cash. The party is short of it, and Gandhi substitutes for the political finance that the Congress

desperately needs.” In all likelihood, he cautions, the shake-up won’t be enough. “The arrival of a new Gandhi family member on the political scene will not fix the organizational infirmities that ail the party overnight.” Her money, though, might at least “earn [the party] a seat at the table.”

Outside of India, the world is watching to see how the election will play out—and perhaps no country as anxiously as Pakistan.

“In the run-up to the election,” Fahd Humayun, a Pakistani researcher, [writes](#), “Modi has painted Pakistan less as a strategic opponent and more as a threat to civilization. He has played to nationalist sentiment, threatening to teach Pakistan a lesson including by diverting water away from the water-insecure nation.” The muscle flexing may distract from New Delhi’s economic woes, Humayun continues, but it is also making peace between India and Pakistan even more distant.

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Ultimately, though, the election will be decided on domestic grounds. And India’s voters have a history of not only throwing out governments but also of confounding poll predictions. Results are expected to be declared on May 23.

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