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BRIEF

UNDERSTANDING THE INDIAN VOTER

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The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) historic victory in India's 2014 general election prompted declarations of a watershed in the behavior of the Indian voter. Upon closer inspection, the reality is more nuanced. On some parameters, such as voting based on economic and ethnic considerations, there were indeed discernible changes. However, the empirical evidence suggests these shifts were well under way before 2014. In other areas—namely, support for regional parties, dynastic politicians, and candidates associated with criminal activity—contemporary voters demonstrated much greater continuity with the past.

Continuity and Change in Voting Behavior

- Good economics can make for good politics in India. While parochial considerations have long been thought to play a central role in shaping voters' choices, evidence from state and national elections suggests that macroeconomic realities are increasingly relevant.

- There has been much discussion of regional parties' increasing influence in Indian politics. But recent electoral trends reveal a surprising degree of stability in the balance of power between national and regional parties.

- Dynastic politics may not be popular, but dynastic politicians are. At least one in five

members of parliament elected in 2014 came from a political family.

- Indian voters have a long history of electing politicians who are the subject of ongoing criminal cases. The 2014 results demonstrate an underlying demand for politicians who can get things done—even if they are connected with wrongdoing.

- When voters cast their vote, they do not necessarily vote their caste. Social biases remain entrenched in India, but the transmission of those biases into the political domain is imperfect and may be weakening.

Broader Lessons for Indian Democracy

While the regional-national balance of power is steady, there has been an upheaval among national parties. For now, the ascendant BJP has replaced the foundering Indian National Congress as the pole around which political competition is organized.

Politicians who seek to gain strength using identity-based appeals alone have generally not fared well. While voters may harbor deep-seated social biases, identity-based concerns and economic evaluations are both in play. The most successful politicians have mastered the art of skillfully combining both types of appeals.

The composition of the candidate pool does not appear to be shifting, despite an increase in the absolute number of parties contesting elections. Voters have more choice than ever before, yet there is little qualitative change in the nature of the candidates themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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