

FROM CAKEWALK TO CONTEST: INDIA'S 2019 GENERAL ELECTION

MILAN VAISHNAV | APRIL 2018

In approximately twelve months, Indian voters from Kanyakumari to Kashmir will go to the polls to select their next parliament. The country's 2019 general election—like previous contests—will be the largest democratic exercise in world history. More than 850 million voters will be eligible to help determine which political party or alliance will form the government and, in turn, who will serve as prime minister.

Electoral outcomes are notoriously difficult to predict in India's fragmented, hypercompetitive democracy. But one need not go out on a limb to declare that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi would be the clear favorite if the election were held today. Following the BJP's decisive 2014 mandate, many analysts confidently proclaimed that Modi would remain in power for at least two, if not three, terms. Opinion polls reveal that Modi remains highly popular after four years in office, and the BJP has managed to methodically expand its national footprint in numerous state elections since 2014. The opposition, comprised of the once-dominant Indian National Congress and a plethora of regional parties, has struggled to counter the BJP onslaught.

Yet the election's clear front-runner is far from invulnerable, despite anticipation of a BJP cakewalk in 2019. Although the intricacies of the upcoming race—such as the selection of candidates and the rhetoric of campaigns—remain unknown one year out, underlying structural conditions

suggest far rockier terrain may lie ahead. In particular, four crucial objectives keep BJP strategists up at night: expanding beyond regional strongholds, recruiting new—and retaining old—coalition partners, withstanding a disappointing economic performance, and contending with fluctuations in voter mobilization. The party's performance in the 2019 election will hinge largely on its ability to address these potential vulnerabilities and the opposition's ability to exploit them.

2014 AND BEYOND

To understand the BJP's position today, one must recall how unusual India's 2014 election results were. Between 2004 and 2014, the Congress Party and its allies (known collectively as the United Progressive Alliance, or UPA) ran the central government in New Delhi. Although the UPA oversaw record economic growth during its first term, its second term was markedly less positive, as a slowing economy, doubts about its leadership, and an endless parade of corruption scandals badly dented the Congress-led alliance's credibility.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In an era of fractured political mandates in New Delhi, the Modi-led BJP achieved what many analysts believed was unthinkable: it won a clear, single-party majority in the lower house of the Indian parliament (the Lok Sabha) by capturing 282 of 543 seats (see figure 1). Its political allies—members of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—netted another fifty-three seats. Although the BJP campaigned under the banner of “Mission 272” (a number that represents the threshold for a parliamentary majority), few Indians (even within the BJP itself) believed that the party was likely to meet, let alone surpass, this mark on its own.

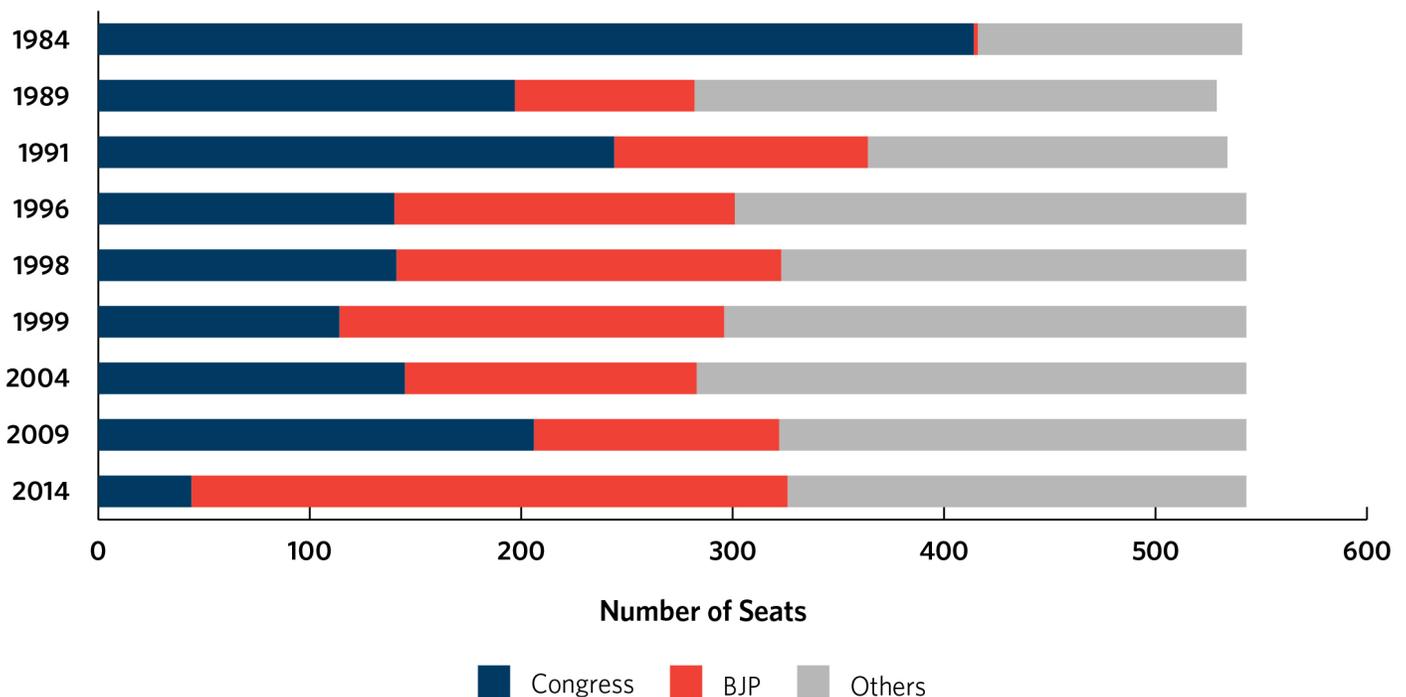
The 2014 electoral outcome was historic. No party had obtained a clear majority of Lok Sabha seats on its own since 1984 when the Congress did so after the assassination of former prime minister Indira Gandhi. 2014 was the first time a non-Congress party had achieved an outright majority by itself without the need for a large, unwieldy coalition. Meanwhile, the Congress sank to its lowest total in history—a paltry forty-four seats. Prior to 2014, the fewest seats the Congress had won in a general election was 114 in 1999.

In addition, the 2014 election saw record voter turnout: 66.4 percent of eligible voters (or roughly 554 million voters) cast ballots, a sharp uptick from the 58 percent recorded in the two previous elections.

With each passing year, the national reach of the BJP has grown while the reach of the Congress has shrunk. The BJP and its allies now run twenty-one of India’s twenty-nine states—home to over 70 percent of the Indian population (see figure 2). Prior to Modi’s election, the NDA controlled just eight states. The BJP’s gains have largely come at the expense of the Congress; whereas the latter ran thirteen states prior to the last general election, today it governs in just four. Furthermore, only two of these (Karnataka and Punjab) have substantial populations (with roughly 90 million residents between them).

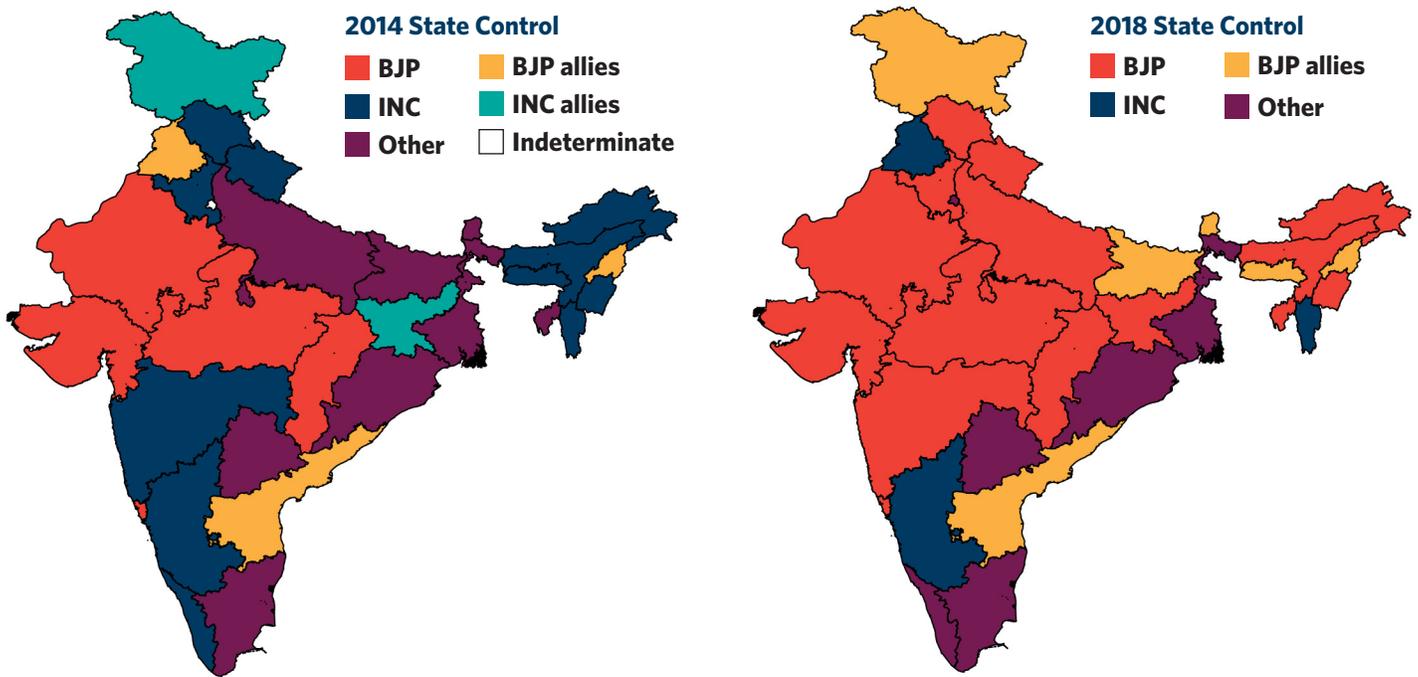
The lion’s share of the credit for the BJP’s resurgence belongs to Modi, who remains the most popular politician in India. In May 2014, 36 percent of Indians surveyed named him as their preferred candidate for prime minister, compared

Figure 1. Distribution of Seats in Lok Sabha Elections, 1984–2014



Source: Author’s calculations based on data from the Election Commission of India (ECI)

Figure 2. BJP's Expanding Footprint, 2014–2018



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Election Commission of India (ECI)

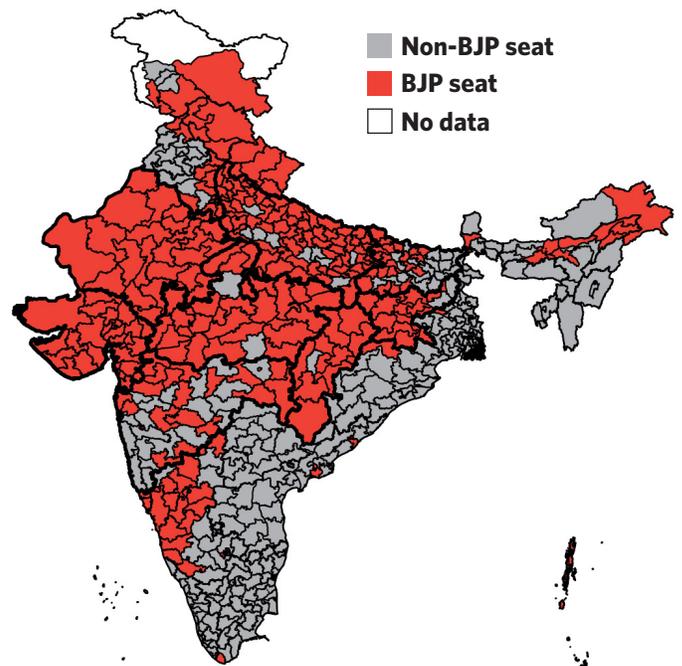
Note: The maps indicate the partisan control of states in 2014 and 2018, respectively.

to just 14 percent for Congress President Rahul Gandhi. Although Modi's rating might sound low from a comparative perspective, it is remarkably high for India's fragmented political system in which 464 parties contested the 2014 general election. While Gandhi's rating had risen to 20 percent by January 2018, Modi's popularity has remained extremely stable throughout his four years in office (hovering around 37 percent). Historically, Gandhi's rating has proven erratic, in part due to his twin struggles with consistency and effectiveness.

REIMAGINING THE MAP

Pulling off an encore performance of the BJP's sweeping 2014 victory will be a tall order; to compensate for potential losses in its core areas, the party must venture into new territory. In 2014, the BJP virtually swept areas where it traditionally enjoys strong support in northern and western India (see figure 3). Just eight states—Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh—accounted for over 75 percent of the BJP's

Figure 3. BJP's 2014 Performance in Core States



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Election Commission of India (ECI)
 Note: The eight states that account for 75 percent of BJP seats are outlined in bold.

tally in parliament. Collectively, these states account for 273 seats, of which the BJP won 216 (nearly 80 percent).

Running the table in two consecutive elections will be an uphill battle. Indian voters are legendary for their tendency to harbor anti-incumbency sentiments; research suggests that individual members of parliament (MPs) are just as likely to get thrown out of office at the end of their term as to get voted back in. There are also state-level anti-incumbency effects that have negative spillovers on national politics. Parliamentary candidates representing a given state's ruling party enjoy an electoral advantage in national elections, but only when national elections are held early in the state government's term. Once this honeymoon period is over, holding power in India's states becomes a liability in general elections. This poses a problem for the BJP, which serves as the ruling party in all eight of these core states; in five of them, its governments are nearing the ends of their terms.

Because Modi and BJP President Amit Shah—a longtime Modi aide and a savvy campaign strategist—know engineering another sweep of these eight core states will be difficult, they have placed great importance on expanding the BJP's footprint into parts of the country where it traditionally has been weak. Hence, the BJP's painstaking devotion to breaking into India's northeast—long considered to be a bastion of the Congress and smaller regional parties. The northeast is often seen as inconsequential to the overall electoral picture given that it accounts for just 3.7 percent of India's population. Yet the region boasts twenty-five parliamentary seats, a tempting prize for a party that covets new territory to compensate for losses likely to be sustained elsewhere. Thanks to a series of recent state-level victories, the BJP now sits in government in seven of these eight states and is building up organizational and alliance networks across the region; as a relatively new player in northeastern India, the BJP is less likely to fall prey to Indian voters' antipathy for incumbents there than in the party's traditional strongholds. Whereas the Congress retains the capacity to put up a good fight in the Hindi heartland, its stature in the northeast has rapidly diminished.

Having established a foothold in northeastern India, the BJP now aims to increase its strength along India's eastern

seaboard in major states such as Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal. In a fifth state, Andhra Pradesh, the BJP has worked primarily through a key alliance partner—the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). The four aforementioned states serve as a sort of firewall the BJP has struggled to penetrate in national elections. All told, these five states collectively account for 144 seats in the parliament. Each is home to one (or more) powerful parties with strong ties to linguistic, regional, and cultural identities the BJP currently lacks.

However, this firewall may be fracturing. In West Bengal, the BJP trails the ruling Trinamool Congress Party in terms of statewide appeal. But it views the demise of the two principal opposition forces—the Left (a coalition of left-leaning parties) and the Congress—as providing a crucial opening for it to emerge as the second-largest party. The ruling Biju Janata Dal of Odisha won twenty of twenty-one parliamentary seats in 2014, ceding just one to the BJP. But the latter won one-quarter of the vote and has subsequently performed well in municipal elections. In Tamil Nadu, the BJP is a bit player on its own but sees the potential to make inroads through alliances. Fissures within the state's ruling party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, have given the BJP hope that the party system might be ripe for realignment.

COALITION DYNAMICS

Sustaining previous hard-won gains and breaking new ground in pockets of the country outside BJP strongholds, however, will require partners. On this score, the BJP's prognosis is mixed.

On the one hand, thanks to the widespread sense that the BJP has the wind at its back, the party has become the central pole around which politics in India revolves. This distinguished position once belonged to the Congress, but its recent electoral stumbles and the BJP's abundant successes have decisively changed the equation. In three recent state elections—in Goa, Manipur, and Meghalaya—the BJP failed to emerge as the single largest party. Nonetheless, thanks to its allure as an alliance partner, the BJP formed governments in all three states by winning over several smaller parties who

decided to join a party gaining momentum rather than one appearing to lose it. Across states, the BJP, not the Congress, seems to be the default governing party.

Yet recent events suggest that the BJP's electoral coalition is showing signs of strain. Existing BJP allies are voicing concerns about the party's methods, raising the possibility that its electoral coalition could fracture. Two of the BJP's biggest allies, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the TDP in Andhra Pradesh, have recently put the BJP on notice that they are unhappy with its "arrogant" leadership style. The Shiv Sena announced in January 2018 that it would contest the 2019 elections alone, rather than with the BJP. In March, the TDP pulled its ministers from the central cabinet in New Delhi to express disappointment with the Modi government's failure to help Andhra Pradesh tap additional central government funds. When the BJP refused to budge, the TDP announced its decision to formally exit the alliance. These ruptures, while not fatal or irreversible, potentially complicate the BJP's electoral arithmetic in 2019. If the BJP is successfully tarred as anti-Andhra, it would be difficult for the party to notch a pre-poll alliance with any of the major regional parties there, increasing the likelihood that a sizeable chunk of the state's twenty-five seats would be out of the BJP's reach. In Maharashtra, provided the opposition coalition remains intact, the split with the Shiv Sena could create a three-way race.

Luckily for the BJP, the opposition remains in disarray. The Congress has been slow to rectify the organizational and leadership deficiencies laid bare in 2014. As one senior party leader has mused, the Congress has faced electoral crises before, but what it faces today is an existential crisis. While it will likely gain seats in 2019, one Congress leader privately admitted that a triple-digit figure would be a stretch at present.¹ Left parties have seen a precipitous decline nearly everywhere save for the state of Kerala, its last remaining stronghold. The upstart Aam Aadmi Party, which came to power in the Delhi state assembly by way of an assertive, agitational brand of politics, has struggled to extend its reach beyond the national capital. Moreover, parties opposed to the BJP have failed to coordinate and pool their votes so as to keep the BJP out of power.

There have been two notable exceptions where opposition parties have set aside their differences and forged a degree of bonhomie. The first was the 2015 state election in Bihar, where a so-called grand alliance of opposition parties joined hands to keep the BJP from winning power. The opposition alliance won a resounding victory, but this short-lived marriage of convenience ultimately ended when one party defected. More recently, in March 2018, two rival regional parties in Uttar Pradesh buried their long-standing differences to jointly defeat the BJP in a special election. Regional players could give the BJP a run for its money in their respective states, but doing so will require them to work cooperatively—something that does not come naturally to rivals who bitterly jostle for political space. The effects of the BJP's own alliance drama will be mitigated if the opposition proves unable or unwilling to do business together in 2019.

ECONOMIC ANXIETY

But it is not only allies the BJP must worry about retaining; many voters who were swayed by Modi's promise to usher in *acche din* (good times) by reenergizing the Indian economy have also grown restive. In 2014, India was plagued by slumping growth, ballooning deficits, stalled investments, and soaring inflation—offering the BJP untold opportunities to critique the Congress Party's mismanagement of bread-and-butter issues. Although invocations of Hindu majoritarianism also populated the BJP's entreaties, it was the BJP's insistence that it would rectify the declining economy that resonated across the country. Yet as economic progress under Modi has fallen short of expectations, anxieties about the lack of job creation have led to massive popular protests in state after state. While the intensity and scope of voter disaffection with India's economy is not certain, there are signs that disquiet is rising among rural voters who decisively backed the BJP four years ago. Given that farmers account for roughly half of India's labor force, rural economic woes raise alarm bells for every incumbent politician.

BJP strategists once believed that economic revival would be the hallmark of the 2019 campaign. Unfortunately for them, the economy has not experienced a uniform revival (see figure 4). Growth, while high by international standards, remains well below the country's potential. A failure to deal

quickly with a systemic banking crisis has bogged down the domestic investment cycle. Inflation, which has fallen from the double-digit levels of the tenure of the Congress, remains a risk in an election year when the pressure to spend will be elevated. Furthermore, the Modi government’s decisions to abruptly remove high-value currency notes from circulation (“demonetize”) and enact the sweeping Goods and Services Tax reform have hurt short-term growth, irrespective of their longer-term merits. More importantly, for the average Indian, job growth has been anemic. According to the Reserve Bank of India, total employment actually shrank between 2014 and 2016. While it appears that nonfarm jobs grew over this period, farming jobs declined—perhaps as a result of successive droughts.

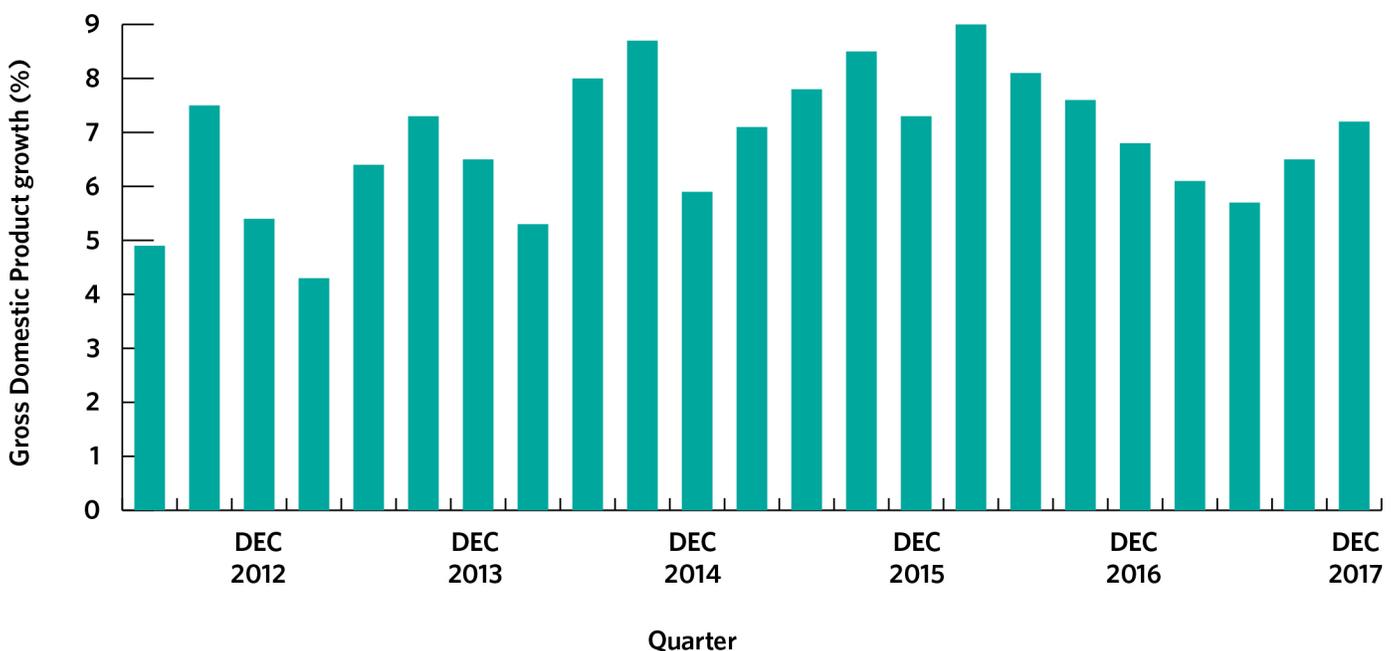
The BJP is betting that its flagship welfare schemes might inoculate it against its patchy economic record. Criticized for having cozy links to corporate capital, Modi’s administration has doggedly tried to burnish its pro-poor credentials by doubling down on major welfare schemes—such as granting every household a bank account, initiating free cooking gas

connections to families below the poverty line, and ensuring universal affordable housing.

These efforts notwithstanding, economic travails are especially apparent in rural India. Although once the bailiwick of the Congress, many rural voters in 2014 switched their allegiance to the BJP—a party that has historically performed better with city-dwellers. The rural shift toward the BJP could easily swing back to the Congress; for instance, available data suggests that support for the BJP alliance among farmers has declined over the past year. Indeed, recent distress in the farming sector is likely sending chills down the spines of BJP leaders. Despite Modi’s promises to double agrarian incomes by 2022, agriculture remains in a state of disrepair. While the causes of this distress are largely structural, proximate factors such as the decline in the prices of several agricultural commodities and shortfalls in farm production have stimulated outrage among many rural Indians.

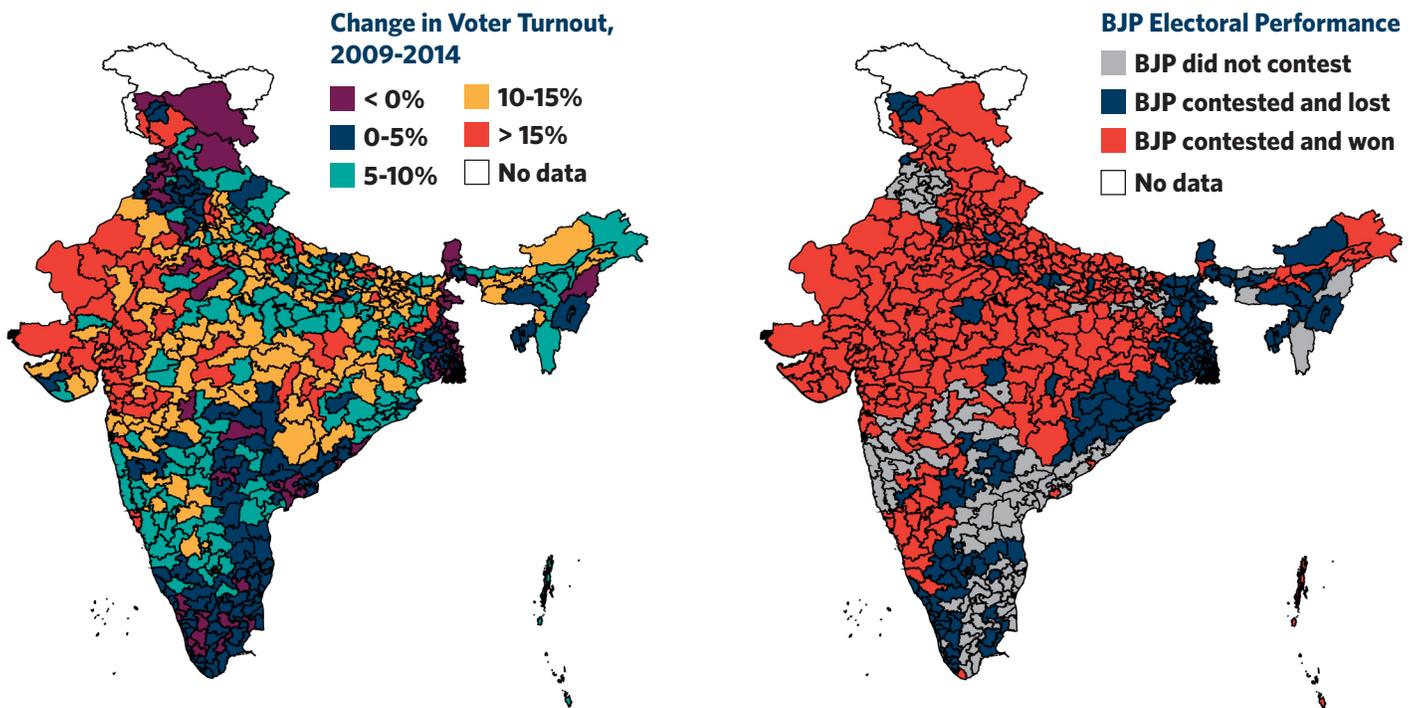
A clear warning shot was fired in December 2017 during elections in Gujarat, a longtime BJP bastion. Although it retained its majority in the state assembly, the BJP

Figure 4. India’s Quarterly GDP Growth, 2012-2017



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

Figure 5. The BJP's Mobilization Advantage in 2014



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Election Commission of India (ECI). This figure is adapted from Neelanjan Sircar, "Voter Turnout and the Modi Wave," *Transitions* (blog), University of Pennsylvania Center for the Advanced Study of India, July 8, 2014.

Note: The map on the left indicates the change in voter turnout between 2009 and 2014. The map on the right indicates the BJP's electoral performance in 2014.

encountered serious rural opposition—especially in the key region of Saurashtra—where the Congress prevailed by capitalizing on caste politics and the waning fortunes of farmers. In March 2018, as many as 50,000 farmers in Maharashtra descended on the state capital of Mumbai to demand the BJP state government move swiftly to aid them. How wide this disaffection has spread is unclear. All eyes will be on upcoming state elections in Karnataka (in May 2018) and Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, and Rajasthan (in December 2018) to discern whether this alleged drop-off in rural locales is sustained.

VOTER MOBILIZATION

A final concern for the BJP in 2019 is voter mobilization. In 2014, the party successfully channeled popular disaffection with the incumbent Congress Party into record voter turnout (66.4 percent). Voter turnout had previously peaked at 64 percent in 1984 and fell to between 56 and 62 percent in

subsequent election cycles. As Neelanjan Sircar has pointed out, there was a strong association between the growth in voter turnout and the improved fortunes of the BJP in the 2014 election (see figure 5). A key source of strength came from young voters. Research has demonstrated that states with the largest increases in the share of young, first-time voters in 2014 also experienced the biggest gains in BJP vote share. With the novelty of Modi and BJP rule in New Delhi wearing thin, there is a risk that voter turnout will return to ordinary levels, reducing the BJP's enthusiasm advantage. One key demographic the BJP believes it can energize in 2019 is women. Although they do not vote as a bloc per se, the party believes several of its welfare schemes have special resonance with women and can influence their votes. This is significant because Indian females are voting in greater numbers than ever before. In 2014, women voted at higher rates than men in sixteen of India's thirty-five states and union territories. At the state level, female turnout now regularly surpasses male turnout.

Looking ahead, the BJP's predicament is how to mobilize voters as an incumbent party. One possibility is that the party will choose to invoke the Hindu nationalist card more expressly and more intensively to rile up its base. Such a move toward polarization would become even more likely if the opposition successfully bands together to forge a common anti-BJP front. Yet such a risky strategy could turn off as many (or more) voters as it galvanizes.

CONCLUSION

One year in advance, many details of the 2019 race remain unknown, but its structural drivers are quickly coming into view. Modi and Shah are wasting no time in recalibrating their approach to mitigate the BJP's unexpected challenges. For instance, the government's most recent budget was packed with pro-poor rhetoric and numerous sops meant to allay rural anger. As existing allies are growing wary of the BJP's modus operandi, the party's high command has stepped

up its outreach to smooth frayed relations. And, concerned about waning voter enthusiasm, Modi has directed the party's elected representatives to redouble efforts to connect with constituents. In one instance, Modi is reported to have warned sitting BJP MPs that they must amass at least 300,000 followers on social media or risk losing their party tickets.

The opposition is making adjustments as well. Gandhi and the once-dithering Congress appear more focused and consistent. The opposition, at least rhetorically, is embracing the need to forge a common anti-BJP front in 2019. Twelve months is an eternity in politics, but one thing has become evident: once thought to be a cakewalk for the BJP, the 2019 election is turning into a contest.

NOTES

- 1 Author interview with a Congress Party MP, New Delhi, January 2018.

The author is grateful to Matthew Lillehaugen for excellent research and editorial assistance and Ryan DeVries for thoughtful edits.

In the months ahead, Carnegie scholars will be analyzing various dimensions of India's upcoming election battle—including coalition dynamics, the shifting demographic trends in the country's electorate, and the impact of elections on India's foreign policy. Keep up to date with the project at CarnegieEndowment.org/IndiaElects2019/.

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