

Spotlight on India's Lok Sabha elections: Why do Indians vote?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2014/04/07/spotlight-on-elections/

2014-4-7

As voting begins in national elections in the world's largest democracy, LSE academics Mukulika Banerjee and Sumantra Bose debate why Indians vote, how this election will differ from previous ones, and what other democracies can learn from India. [Click here for Part Two of this e-debate.](#)

Why do Indians vote?

Mukulika Banerjee: The voter turnouts during the most recent elections in India at the state level were among the highest ever seen. At the national level too, the trend is that turnout is on the rise. The main reason for this is that people see their role in politics as very significant and it often the poorest who are the most enthusiastic voters. While we think elections are about politicians, political parties, and results, voters attach great meaning to their own role in elections. Indians are very aware that without their showing up at polls on election day, there would be no elections or democracy. There's a complex understanding among Indians of their right to vote—they see it as their duty and right as citizens.



Sumantra Bose: The national turnout in the last Lok Sabha election in 2009 was just under 60 per cent, with wide variation across the states of the Indian Union. So it's worth explaining incentives to vote at the state level in different parts of the country.

In my home state, West Bengal in eastern India, which is the country's fourth most populous state, there has been 85-90 per cent voter turnout in state and national elections for over two decades now. This is because West Bengal is one of the most politicised states of India. Most voters there are loyal to one of the two parties that dominate the state's politics, the Trinamool ('Grassroots') Congress and the Communist Party of India-Marxist. People often have staunch partisan affiliations, with families associated with parties for decades. Hence the high turnouts.

Uttar Pradesh in north India, the country's most populous state, is also a highly politicised state, but in a different pattern. Party politics operates above all on the basis of mobilised caste blocks: the upper castes (Brahmins,

Rajputs, Kayasths), various intermediate caste communities such as Yadavs, Jats and Kurmis, Dalits (the lowest castes), etc. All of these groups have interests at stake, and if any fail to vote in sizable numbers it amounts to giving competing groups a walkover.

In Gujarat, the mid-sized state in western India, for the last decade there has been a dominant politician, Narendra Modi, now the frontrunner to be India's next prime minister. He arouses strong feelings: adoration among many and revulsion among others. This creates a compelling incentive to vote one way or the other. When Modi won his third consecutive mandate to form the state government in Gujarat in December 2012, the popular vote was polarised: 48 per cent for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and 40 per cent for the Congress, the main opposition party in the state.

Similarly, there are strong state-level dynamics at play in Andhra Pradesh, the largest state in south India. Due to the recently successful campaign to create Telangana as a separate state out of northern Andhra Pradesh, many people there are fired up to vote for the political party that led the statehood movement, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi. In the other two regions of Andhra Pradesh, there's been a huge backlash against the Telangana movement and the Congress party's central leadership's decision to sanction the division of Andhra Pradesh, and one beneficiary of the anger is likely to be the YSR Congress, a recently formed regional party that broke away from the state's Congress party. So people across India have diverse motivations to vote, and they're all powerful.

Banerjee: People's motivations to vote can be divided between instrumental reasons and expressive reasons. The instrumentality of patronage, the desire to vote for politicians in order to secure development projects, these are all strong motivators. But there are more qualitative reasons to vote as well. These become apparent when voters say things like, "my vote is my weapon," or when they use their votes to punish politicians. In our last [study](#) on why Indians vote conducted during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, people told us that they voted against the party they are loyal to because they were ashamed of the party.

Another important expressive reason why people vote is to experience one aspect of democracy that is only apparent in India on voting day—equality. Only during elections are you only judged along with everyone else as a voter. Class, caste and other factors cease to matter, and you can feel equal to your fellow citizens and you are *ek din ka sultan*, i.e. 'king for a day'. An extension of this is the sense of belonging that comes from voting; people feel left out if their fingers are not marked with indelible ink and there is tremendous peer pressure that makes them feel like they are renegeing on their duties if they don't vote.

Bose: I agree with Mukulika that election day is the great – if transient – leveller of inequality. Many poor Indians, especially, value the fact that in the voting process all are equal—one citizen, one vote. But interests are also extremely important. In Uttar Pradesh, where the Hindu nationalist BJP is resurgent, it's just not an option for the nearly one-fifth of the electorate that's Muslim to sit at home on polling day. They must vote and do what they can to influence the outcome. I expect the Muslim turnout in Uttar Pradesh to be very high in this election.

How will this election be different from previous ones?

Bose: The incumbent government at the centre (New Delhi), led by the Congress party and elected in 2009, has become extraordinarily unpopular across the country over the last three years. Its unpopularity cuts across regions and states, rural-urban divides, and identity and interest groups. The one certainty of this election is that the Congress party will do very badly. We are likely to see Congress's worst showing ever. The lowest number of seats the party has won in a Lok Sabha election to date is 114 (of 543) in 1999, but this time the Congress total is being pegged in the double digits. This election could bring in the terminal phase of the main dynasty in Indian politics – the Nehru-Gandhi family that controls the Congress. It's possible the Congress party won't recover from such a defeat, as its social base has withered away in much of India, including the most populous states. This election could mark the terminal decline of the grand old party of Indian politics.

Who is most likely to benefit? India has a very diverse political landscape and numerous powerful "regional parties"

– parties with a mass base in a specific state of the country. But this is a national election occurring in a time of economic downturn and political uncertainty, and many voters are apprehensive of political chaos replacing the dysfunctional Congress government. So many will vote, especially in a huge swathe of northern and western India (much less so in eastern and southern India) for the BJP, the opposition party best placed to lead a stable government.



Banerjee: More so than Sumantra, I believe this is an extraordinary election. What makes it different? The proportion of the electorate who are first-time voters and the number of voters who are under the age of 25 are sizeable. These young voters have grown up in post-1991 India and are used to India's place in the world and their expectations of government are different than those of the previous generation. Stability is important, but they are much more interested in accountability.

Right from the start, there was a clear sense that we knew who was not going to win the election—the incumbent government. And until now, we had a good sense that we knew who would replace it. But the BJP has had to change the way it runs the party, project itself, and selects its candidates. The terms of the discussion have shifted ever since the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) won 28 seats – far more than projected – in Delhi state elections in December 2013. This was not just a story about Delhi or the urban middle classes of India given that a chunk of Delhi's electorate is rural and poor. What the AAP has done is take on and question how politics is done in India. The AAP has raised questions about dynastic politics and about how candidates are selected. It has introduced some degree of consultation in its internal processes and shown that politics does not have to be dirty by making the money in its campaign funds transparent and easily available on the party's website.

The ex-chief election commissioner S.Y. Quraishi recently said in London that the Election Commission had longed urged parties to be more transparent about campaign financing and not have candidates with criminal records, etc. But parties said they could not run credible campaigns if they followed these recommendations. But Dr. Quraishi pointed out that AAP has done just that—it has shown us the possibility of doing politics, running campaigns, and managing election expenditure in a transparent and accountable way. This could be game-changing as other parties are having to mimic the AAP's methods and in some cases having to respond to some of their charges. In some recent cases, the Supreme Court and the Election Commission have asked the big national parties to provide explanations for the charges levelled against them.

Bose: Mukulika is right, the figures are striking. There are 815 million voters, nearly half are under 35 and almost

one-fifth are first-time voters in the 18-23 age group. The younger generation is assertive and into discourses of rights and accountability. They're interested in substantive democracy. But the yearning for a stable alternative government might trump other factors. The top priority for Indians is to revitalise the economy, invest in human and physical infrastructure, and check inflation. Eventually, the dominant mood in the country might favour a conservative alternative rather than any out-of-the-box option. As the single largest opposition party, the BJP may benefit more than others from the nationwide anti-incumbent mood.

Banerjee: Where we are, at the start of the electoral process, which will unfold in nine phases over six weeks, people have tasted the possibility that you can have a choice to vote for a clean candidate, for someone who doesn't have a criminal record, one who isn't campaigning on a corporate-media-political nexus, someone who made the effort to campaign door to door. People ask why Indians keep voting for corrupt politicians—it's because they usually don't have a choice. But now they do. The question is whether this churning up of Indian politics will throw up alternatives or alternative ways of doing politics.

The other thing I'll be watching for is to see how many people use the new button on the electronic voting machine, the 'None of the Above' or NOTA button. This will reveal how many people reject all available political options, but do not reject the opportunity to participate politically.

Bose: The NOTA button was trialled in the end-2013 state elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Delhi and Mizoram. Only 1 to 3 per cent of those who came to the polling station used the NOTA button in these states, and we'll have to see if that changes in the national election.

Regarding the AAP, fresh initiatives are welcome in a democracy. But I doubt the party's prospects beyond the confines of Delhi, where it's likely to pick up a few seats. It's unclear whether the AAP can win from anywhere else in the country. The only other metropolis where it may get a non-negligible vote share is Bangalore in the south. Only around a quarter of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies have bipolar BJP-Congress contests, that's how diverse India's political landscape is. In this plural landscape, there is space for new politics. But I think the AAP will have a negligible impact in this election.

In [Part Two of this e-debate](#), Banerjee and Bose discuss the issues that will inform voters' thinking and consider what other democracies can learn from India.

[Mukulika Banerjee](#) is an Associate Professor in Social Anthropology at LSE's Department of Anthropology and author of "[Why India Votes?](#)".

[Sumantra Bose](#) is Professor of International and Comparative Politics in LSE's Department of Government and author of "[Transforming India: Challenges to the World's Largest Democracy](#)".

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics