

Which electoral strategy will work in India's upcoming elections?

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Siddharth Bannerjee analyses the campaign strategies of the Congress Party, BJP and AAP in the run up to India's national elections.

In the run up to national elections, nearly 800 million eligible voters – a quarter of whom will be going to the polling booth for the first time – must weigh political, socio-demographic and economic variables to decide who to vote for. Settling on a party is a complicated choice given the [erosion of traditional support bases and the emergence of regional parties](#) and [a third option, the Aam Aadmi Party \(AAP\)](#), at the national level. Issues for voters to consider include economic reform (especially curtailing inflation and eliminating corruption) and parties' capacity to cater to the social aspirations of a buoyant middle class. This post considers how three parties, the Congress Party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the AAP, are preparing for the *Lok Sabha* parliamentary polls, and focuses on the AAP's electoral strategy.



Following an [unprecedented public referendum](#), the [AAP assumed power in the New Delhi State Assembly](#) and immediately put its manifesto to a no-confidence vote. As the party with a minority of seats in the legislature, it required 'outside' support to continue ruling, informal backing it received from [the incumbent Congress party – only recently the target of the AAP's censure](#). Aligning with your opponent is a long-standing post-poll tradition in India, but given the moral stance of the AAP, this coalition was seen by many as a betrayal of the party's founding principles. [Numerous missteps](#) by several top AAP ministers and [infighting](#) (leading to the [expulsion of a party member](#)) in the early weeks after assuming power have led to allegations of [racism](#), [vigilantism](#) and even [anarchism](#). The AAP's [often combative attitude towards its detractors](#) has also seen the [movement lose its sheen](#) even as it plans to unveil candidates and a platform for the elections.

In term of governance activities, the AAP is [implementing its populist agenda](#) at a furious pace before the Model Code of Conduct (which bans major policy initiatives) comes into effect about two months before the national elections. The party has turned all [contractual positions in the Delhi government into permanent](#) posts; passed a fast-track [Delhi-specific jan lokpal bill](#) to combat corruption; [reserved seats for Delhi's students](#) in state educational boards; [opted out of Foreign Direct Investment](#) in the retail sector (to protect small shop and business owners); and [eschewed a security detail](#) so as to shed the 'VIP culture' that is pervasive amongst politicians in Delhi. The AAP has

also trailed some innovative ideas such as [converting unused government buses into homeless shelters](#) during the winter months and taking [environmental measures](#) to protect the polluted Yamuna river that flows through the nation's capital.

But the much larger battles that the AAP is fighting are against the entrenched public sector bureaucracies that operate by their own rules. In less than a month in the post, Arvind Kejriwal, Chief Minister of Delhi and de facto head of the AAP, [ordered the suspension of three and transfer of 800 Water Board officials](#) for indulging in bribery and service delivery obstruction, an [audit of the three privatised power distribution companies](#), and the [transfer of the jurisdiction of the Delhi police under his government's control](#). The last issue is tied to New Delhi's notorious reputation for violent crime, especially sexual assault against women. Following the [gang rape on 15 January of a 51-year-old Danish woman](#) at knife point, Kejriwal sought the suspension of police officers who he believes should be held accountable, and true to previous form, [sat in protest outside the Home Ministry offices](#) until his demands were met.

All these incidents are taking place in the public eye, and for the first time the AAP is facing the full glare of the media spotlight. Under scrutiny, the party seems to be [returning to its roots](#) as it plans its national election strategy. This includes an [online, offline and telephonic attempt to register 10 million volunteers](#) across India by the end of January, a [nomination-based process](#) for accepting candidates (as opposed to other parties' appointment-based system), and a concerted effort to raise funds from small local donors.

The AAP will certainly face several challenges as it scales up its activities to the national level. Firstly, the return on investment that they were able to obtain – running state election campaigns on [Rs. 2,000,000 per constituency](#), largely collected from small donors – worked principally because of [Delhi's high population density](#), which allowed mass mobilisation at a low volunteer-to-electorate ratio. This is not the case in other parts of India, where long distances separate villages, requiring sums of money to be earmarked for travel and outreach activities. Second, the success AAP tasted in Delhi is unique because the [nation's capital is as close to a melting pot](#) as one can get in a linguistically and [caste-stratified](#) country like India. Cutting across the structurally differentiated electorate in the rest of India will be much harder, especially in rural enclaves that do not have much access or exposure to social or even mainstream media, making the issue-centric, post-identity politics of the AAP a hard sell.

The [AAP plans on contesting about 400 seats](#) (out of a total of 545) in the Indian Parliament and can optimistically hope to win between 25-50 seats, making it one of the top five parties overall. This puts the party in the position to play spoiler or kingmaker to the party looking to form the next government, most likely the BJP. By positioning itself slightly to the [right of the Congress and to the left of the BJP](#), the AAP has attracted the median voter, a trend that has [both the mainstream national parties worried](#) about losing a significant vote share. Both parties also sense the [strong anti-establishment feeling](#) in the population and are doing their best to capitalise on it by [offering their own populist measures](#).

The [internally divided Congress Party](#) still lacks [clear leadership](#) and its party platform and election manifesto are yet to be endorsed by the Indian public. In a [televised statement](#), [Prime Minister Manmohan Singh](#) said that he would not be contesting another round of elections and, for a normally very reserved man, took an uncharacteristic dig at Narendra Modi, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. Beyond the taint of corruption surrounding his government, Dr Singh also leaves behind a [chequered economic legacy](#), despite being the Finance Minister who successfully liberalised the Indian economy in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, Congress is drawing attention away from this record and focusing instead on its foreign policy credentials, as the [Devyani Khobragade incident](#) illustrates.

The BJP on the other hand, has a strong, if polarising, leader in Modi, who recently outlined his [economic and social vision](#), which includes an idea to [institute 100 'smart cities' and bullet trains](#) to ferry people between them. Modi's strong suit is his past performance of economic development in Gujarat and will contest this election on his track record of decisive administration and governance. The BJP is also coming out with innovative, if [ultimately unworkable](#), ideas such as the [Bank Transaction Tax](#), a clear sign that the party believes that fixing the economy and catering to the middle class is its main interest. Finally, the BJP's strategy to counter the rise of the AAP seems to be

to paint it as a crony of the incumbent Congress party (pointing to the alliance between the two in Delhi) and to take the fight to the AAP's (virtual) backyard by highlighting their numerous missteps via cyberspace campaigns.

The role played by first-time voters is going to be the X-factor in determining the outcome of the 2014 Indian elections. As an increasingly media- and ICT-savvy and politically conscious group that is willing to engage in social agitation, the 18 to 24-year-old demographic cohort could sway the result of the polls. How politicians reach out and cater to the needs of this diverse set of young Indians is going to be a very interesting story line to follow.

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