



## Introduction to a special issue of *India Review*: the consequences of the 2019 Indian general election for politics and policy in India

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### ABSTRACT

This essay introduces a special issue of *India Review* on the consequences of the 2019 Indian general election for politics and public policy. The special issue assesses how the 2019 elections will impact four key policy and political domains: the party system, minority rights, the economy, and federalism.

India's 2019 general election was undeniably a watershed moment in the country's post-independence political history. Despite concerns about a slumping economy, the baggage of anti-incumbency, and greater opposition coordination, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi cruised to victory, attaining a second consecutive single-party majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament). Indeed, it was the first time that a non-Congress government had been brought back to power since 1947. And the BJP did so in an election that saw voter turnout hit an all-time high (67.2 percent) and in which the party dominated its opponents on nearly every score.<sup>1</sup> According to survey data compiled by the Lokniti Program of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), the BJP triumphed in both rural and urban areas, across Hindu caste groups, among voters of all classes, and in all four corners of the country.

The BJP's 2014 and 2019 general election victories, coupled with the party's meticulous expansion at the state-level and approaching majority in the Rajya Sabha (indirectly-elected upper house of Parliament), firmly establish it as the central pole around which politics in India now revolves. If the party's victory in 2014 raised doubts about the resilience of India's coalition-based "third party system," the 2019 election decisively shattered the idea that 2014 was a "black swan" election – a lone aberration rather than the dawn of a new era.<sup>2</sup>

Under the watchful gaze of Modi and party president Amit Shah, the BJP amply demonstrated its electoral vigor, organizational robustness,

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fundraising prowess, and narrative-shaping ability. It has also shown its ability to flex its ideological muscle. The twin forces of Hindu nationalism and what Suhas Palshikar calls a “new developmentalism” constitute the two pillars of its ideological vision for a *Naya* (new) India.<sup>3</sup> Both factors helped propel the party back to power, and both have also been on display in the aftermath of the election.

Just months after its landmark victory, the BJP government announced its intention to fulfill a longstanding core objective of successive BJP election manifestos: the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which for decades had granted semi-autonomous status to the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. Modi’s BJP leveraged its parliamentary strength to push the bill through Parliament on promises of integrating the contentious state fully into the Indian union and uplifting the welfare of its more than twelve million inhabitants. In December 2019, the government pushed through a controversial new bill that grants expedited citizenship to illegal migrants from three of India’s neighbors but only if they belong to non-Muslim religious faiths. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), coupled with the potential of a new nationwide register of citizens, brought protestors concerned about the marginalization of India’s minorities out into the streets. At home and abroad, the move fueled growing skepticism about the resilience of India’s democratic institutions.

This special issue of *India Review* addresses the implications of the 2019 general election for India’s democratic polity. The timing of these essays, therefore, is worth noting. Since the authors put pen to paper in the immediate aftermath of the elections, important shifts have taken place in India’s electoral and policy landscape. This is the inevitable challenge of real-time analysis. It is for this reason that we brought together a diverse set of academics and research-oriented practitioners who help place the election in comparative and historical context for students and scholars of India and South Asia. The result is a unique, balanced, and illuminating collection of articles that stand apart from the plethora of post-election analyses.

Though the broad remit of this collection is to assess how the 2019 election results will impact four key domestic policy and political arenas – the party system, minority rights, economy, and federalism – the underlying philosophical concern pertains to the trajectory of power within India. Multiple commentaries and emerging academic work have surfaced recently investigating historical parallels between the imprint of the pervasive Congress Party and its era-defining leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi during most of India’s post-Independence years, and the BJP machine and indefatigable Narendra Modi today. Within these parallels, straightforward questions transpire around power and its deployment. These relate to the ideational power and pathways of leaders, the strength of political power at the polls, the institutional and economic power to propel

ordinary people out of poverty, and – perhaps above all – the vibrancy of checks and balances on power in a diverse nation such as India.

The BJP's impressive expansion of its political footprint, punctuated by its triumph in 2019, has led scholars to label the current phase of Indian politics the "second dominant party system." This narrative gathered steam as the Indian National Congress, which for decades occupied the role of India's dominant political force, has for some time faced existential questions around its own ideology and leadership.<sup>4</sup> In our first essay, however, political scientist Adam Ziegfeld notes that the term dominance carries with it a very specific meaning in the political science literature that often gets lost in more contingent discourse. According to the literature, a political party is said to be truly dominant if it rules uninterrupted for two decades or more. This begs the question: what are the BJP's prospects for future electoral victories? Although it is impossible to predict whether the BJP will be able to attain long-term dominance, Ziegfeld argues that the ruling party possesses few of the structural advantages common to most dominant political parties elsewhere. While the BJP enjoys a certain depth of support in its electoral catchment area, he argues that the party otherwise does not obviously fulfill the other metrics of dominance: it does not face a major political opponent with whom other parties refuse to govern; does not garner especially large vote shares (i.e. majority or near-majority of votes cast); is not competitive in all parts of the country; and does not compete against a fragmented opposition (at least by Indian standards). Even though there is no doubt that the BJP is the most popular political party in India by some distance, it is also clear – according to Ziegfeld – that it does not *yet* possess the same structural party-system advantages the Congress enjoyed during its period of dominance.

Indeed, while the structural comparisons between the BJP and the old Congress evolve, recent work by Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma has reified the ideological distance between both parties.<sup>5</sup> The two key axes of ideological conflict in India – statism and recognition – highlight distinct visions of the nation that specifically foreground the politics of minority rights.<sup>6</sup> Under BJP rule, the growing strength of Hindu nationalism and the weakening of Muslim representation are indisputable. The two are significantly, but not perfectly, correlated, posits political scientist Adnan Farooqui in his essay. Indeed, Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha has historically been well below the community's overall population share. This is because the consistent under-representation of Muslims in the political arena has a structural component. For starters, Indian Muslims are geographically dispersed across the country; only constitute a majority in the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Lakshadweep; and mostly reside in semi-urban or urban settlements outside of the wider net of rural parliamentary constituencies. This fact, combined with the incentives embedded within

India's first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, has rendered Indian Muslims largely irrelevant to the construction of parliamentary majorities – an attribute that is especially exacerbated in an era of Hindu nationalist dominance.

The rise of the BJP, which can be thought of adding a cyclical component to patterns of representation, has only deepened a trend of Muslim under-representation that had already been firmly established. Secularism has lost its currency with the electorate, with traditional “secular” parties such as the Congress Party choosing not to mobilize around it for fear of being tarnished as minority appeasers. The so-called Mandal parties, which relied heavily on bringing together Muslims and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have also fallen on hard times. As a result, while the overall share of Muslim Members of Parliament (MPs) in the Lok Sabha has not declined sharply in recent elections, Farooqui argues that there has been a “ghettoization” of Indian Muslim voters. Today, Muslim candidates are primarily elected only in constituencies with a substantial number of Muslim voters. The expansion of the BJP, in combination with the dilemmas facing many non-BJP opposition parties in countering majoritarian mobilization, has meant that there are few Muslims being elected from seats where Muslims are a distinct minority.

Quite simply, parties face little incentive to represent Muslims in most sections of the country. One of the implications of the 2019 verdict, therefore, is that even parties opposed to the BJP may be “reluctant to articulate and raise issues important to the Muslim community” out of fear of “majoritarian backlash and countermobilization.” The BJP's concept of the nation has permeated not only the electoral realm, but also the policy sphere. Notably, the long-standing intention (and international expectation) of further market-based economic reforms to unlock the country's vast economic promise has co-existed alongside growing episodes of nativist and populist economic measures, to which our third and fourth articles turn.

The 2019 election has consequences for day-to-day federal relations between the Union government in New Delhi and state governments. Due to his background as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi campaigned in 2013 and 2014 by promising to empower states vis-à-vis Delhi and to end the top-down, one-size-fits-all approach that had characterized most Indian national governments since 1947. Initially, the Modi government did take several concrete steps toward fiscal decentralization by accepting the 14th Finance Commission's recommendations to devolve more untied funds to the states and abolishing the Planning Commission.

However, as Yamini Aiyar and Louise Tillin argue, these moves were not – as had been advertised – unambiguously positive developments from the perspective of India's states. For starters, the Finance Commission's mandate of devolving 42 percent of the divisible pool of resources (up from 32 percent) to the

states was never actually fulfilled during the term of the 14th Finance Commission. Furthermore, the abolition of the Planning Commission and the creation of the NITI Aayog in its stead have not fundamentally changed patterns of centralization. As Aiyar and Tillin argue in their article – and in a callback to the old “Congress System” – growing congruence between ruling parties at the state and center have made internal coordination within the BJP the primary vehicle for federal dialogue. In addition, NITI Aayog has created new direct lines of communication between the Union government and administrative districts (which fall under the purview of states). Furthermore, the scrapping of the Planning Commission has meant there is no single administrative body that can serve as an institutional venue for negotiation between Delhi and state capitals over plan funds. Together, the boundaries between the party and state have grown murkier.

Rather than fundamentally reshaping center-state relations in a more decentralized direction, Modi 1.0 (2014–2019) has strengthened the hand of the Union government. This is a direct result, the authors argue, of the Modi government’s political project of taking steps toward “One Nation” – a longstanding concern of the BJP – and projecting the Prime Minister as the embodiment of a new welfare state in which there is a direct linkage between Modi, the initiation of social welfare schemes, and the voter who receives them. What this means for Modi 2.0 (2019–2024), argue the authors, is a continued move toward centralization. Indeed, the abrogation of Article 370 early in Modi’s second term and continued talk of reforming the Constitution to allow for simultaneous state and national elections are both in keeping with the overall thrust of Modi 1.0. The drive toward centralization has been further enabled by the anemic performance of regional political parties in the 2019 election and the consolidation of a new party system built around the electoral hegemony of the BJP. The overall picture for federalism signals weak checks and balances between the Union and states over the course of the next five years.

In the concluding essay, scholars Rohit Chandra and Michael Walton review the economic performance of Modi 1.0 and the lessons it holds for Modi 2.0, adopting a state-business relations lens. The authors argue that the Modi government inherited an economy from its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) predecessor that was a combination of “oligarchic capitalism” and a “half-baked social democratic project” resulting in fast growth with corruption, dubious politician-business linkages, and a raft of compensatory social safety nets.

Despite campaigning on a pledge to reorient the Indian economy toward a vision of “minimum government, maximum governance” and away from costly welfare programs, the authors claim that Modi 1.0 instead delivered a package of good government, pro-business policies alongside a top-down nationalist project which subordinates commercial considerations. Indeed, the Modi government reduced high-level corruption and instituted many reforms squarely aimed at

curbing crony capitalism such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), and the auctioning of natural resource licenses. But its first term also stands out for ineffective and disruptive measures such as demonetization, resulting in a period of growth far lower than what domestic and international investors had forecast.<sup>7</sup> Overall, for Modi and the BJP, sagging private investment did not receive the boost the government had hoped. Chandra and Walton pin the blame on the patchy implementation of key reforms, a reluctance to frontally tackle the issue of non-performing assets (NPAs) on the books of state-owned banks, and misguided industrial policy.

The implications for Modi 2.0 are clear. First, the institutional changes to the structure of Indian capitalism are partial, incomplete, and subject to ambiguity and unevenness in implementation. Second, economic outcomes are not necessarily the result of “policy mistakes,” as much as long-standing structural factors and patterns of influence that have been reinforced by the BJP’s nationalist project. The jubilation around the BJP’s sweeping 2019 electoral victory can be contrasted with an economic atmosphere of “increasing gloom.” Slowing growth and sagging private investment have led to an overall trust deficit between the state and various commercial actors. The consequences for the Indian economy are dire insofar as an adherence to the status quo by a single-party majority government furthers the entrenchment of business elites, contributes to a loss of productivity, and ultimately erodes independent accountability institutions.

Taken together, the essays contained in this special issue prompt difficult new questions about the future trajectory of Indian democracy. First, the electoral and ideological dominance of the BJP undermines whatever vestiges that might have remained of India’s third-party system, during which time no single national party was able to establish outright hegemony. In fact, recent state and national elections have given a clear boost to political recentralization. Will this change trigger constitutional alterations that rewrite the center-state compact or will new sources of political opposition emerge from states that have traditionally jealously guarded states’ rights?

Second, with global conditions quickly deteriorating amidst a pandemic and slowing domestic growth prompting renewed calls for protecting flailing Indian industries, what appetite exists for further reforms at a critical juncture for India’s economy? The evidence so far is that social and cultural issues have taken precedence over economic concerns. Will the expanding nationalist project further entrench structural weaknesses, such as the hollowing out of institutions for managing federalism and selective regulatory implementation of particularistic state-business deals?

Finally, there is growing concern in India about majoritarianism and the place of minorities in India’s democracy. Recent actions in Jammu and Kashmir, coupled with the protests unfolding and spreading around the controversial CAA and a potential nationwide National Register of Citizens

(NRC) have prompted some commentators to wonder aloud about whether India is moving toward a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) in which minority rights are constricted through a series of *de jure* maneuvers and *de facto* social realities. At its core, how the BJP and Modi's rising power will be defined and delineated may well hold the answer.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the authors who contributed to this special issue. They have not only produced rich and thoughtful essays, but they have also gathered and interpreted real-time data that was being shaped as they wrote. We would also like to thank the outstanding teams at the Center for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies for hosting workshops pursuant to this series, as well as to Marshall Bouton and Devesh Kapur for their leadership. We must also give a special mention to Megan Maxwell, whose research and editorial assistance on this series was essential. Finally, we are grateful to the Editor Eswaran Sridharan and Managing Editor Anthony Cerulli, for letting us organize, manage, and direct this project. While the articles in this special issue will by no means be the last word on the consequences of the largest democratic exercise in recorded history, we believe that the research and analysis presented here does open up a debate on the direction of India's democracy for the years to come.

## Notes

1. Election Commission of India.
2. Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, "The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (September, 2019), <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/201909-VaishnavHinton.pdf> (accessed September 22, 2019).
3. Suhas Palshikar, "Towards Hegemony," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 33, (August 18, 2018): 36–42.
4. In July 2019, following the general election debacle, Rahul Gandhi stepped down as president of the Congress Party. But, as this special issue goes to press, rumors are swirling in New Delhi that Gandhi will once more assume the top job in the Congress Party, replacing his mother Sonia Gandhi. India's oldest political party has become synonymous with the dynastic rule of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Some scholars have argued that this kind of dynastic rule has been consequential in maintaining party discipline and even upholding some democratic norms. See Kanchan Chandra, *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party, and Family in Contemporary Indian Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
5. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
6. Bilal Baloch, "Crisis, Credibility, and Corruption: How Ideas and Institutions Shape Government Behavior in India" (PhD Dissertation, 2017). <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:a017adea-7dc4-45a2-9246-4df6adcabb9b> (accessed September 22, 2019).
7. Methodological changes have led to overestimating GDP growth by 2.5 percentage points per year between 2011–12 and 2016–17, according to original research conducted by

a former Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India. See Arvind Subramanian, “India’s GDP Mis-estimation: Likelihood, Magnitudes, Mechanisms, and Implications,” (Harvard Center for International Development Faculty Working Paper No. 354, June 2019), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/publications/faculty-working-papers/india-gdp-overestimate> (accessed September 22, 2019).

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