



India: Election-Watcher's Guide

India will hold elections on five dates starting September 5 and ending October 3. Several August polls show the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies running well ahead of the Congress Party and its associates. They project another coalition government, with a larger majority. The elections will not conclude for another month, so this could change.

If the BJP wins, it will have a slightly easier time than Congress in resuming a serious dialogue with Pakistan. On economic reform, it would be less hemmed in by electoral alliances than Congress. Other policy differences are small. More important in assessing the new government is the chance for greater stability. As for the likely leaders, Prime Minister Vajpayee is familiar and experienced, but his record during his one and a half years in office is mixed.

The Stakes: India will elect its 570-member lower house of parliament, called the Lok Sabha. The outgoing house had two large parties — the Bharatiya Janata Party, which heads the government and has 181 seats, and Congress with 141. Of the other 38 parties, only 6 had more than 10 members. Geographically, the big prizes are Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the heart of Hindi-speaking northern India, with 85 and 54 seats respectively and a strong BJP presence, followed by Maharashtra, with 48 seats and split party loyalties.

The Issues: Aside from the few times when major political mood swings produced landslide victories for one party, India's elections usually turn on local matters, caste loyalties, and patronage. A few issues dominate this year's debate:

- The character of India: The BJP stands for a strong Hindu cultural identity; Congress traditionally stood for a secular India. The BJP's record on Hindu-Muslim relations was good, but its tenure was marred by ugly attacks against Christians. A metaphor for this issue is Sonia Gandhi's Italian origins, periodically raised by the BJP and the reason for a Congress split.
- Economic policy: India's moves toward a market economy are well entrenched, but further reforms are an issue, with leftists arguing against further liberalization and privatization. No politician wants to abolish subsidies.
- Foreign and security policy are rarely election issues. The 1998 nuclear test gave Vajpayee only a fleeting boost. His handling of recent India-Pakistan fighting is an asset, provided he is subtle in taking advantage of it. Congress is accusing him of being caught napping by the Pakistanis.
- Governance and corruption may be the "sleeping giant" of India's political future and of this election. Disillusionment with the other governments' records boosted the BJP from 160 seats in 1996 to the 181 that permitted it to form a government two years later. This time, its own mixed record will be under scrutiny.

The Players: India has three types of parties:

- Two parties with national aspirations, the BJP, headed by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Congress, headed by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi.
- Regional parties based in one or two states. In the north, the key players are in Uttar Pradesh (the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav) and Bihar (the Rashtriya Janata Dal, or RJD, of Laloo Prasad Yadav). Tamil Nadu, in the south, boasts two bitterly opposed groups, the DMK and the AIADMK.

- Ideologically based parties, mostly on the left. The most important is the Communist Party Marxist (CPM), which has run the state government in West Bengal for more than two decades. The most colorful is the low caste-oriented BSP, led by the fiery Mayawati. The Janata Dal, once considered the core of a "third force," is splintered and unlikely to be much of a national player.

The Game Plan: Both national parties need to energize their core constituencies while expanding their vote pool. An outright majority is a long shot for either; both have worked hard to line up coalition partners. With some interesting exceptions, the BJP has done better with regional parties, the Congress with ideological parties.

The BJP takes a hard line on Pakistan and is linked with a number of militant Hindu organizations known collectively as the "Sangh Parivar" or "family." Its heartland is the north-center and northwest of India, especially among upper castes and the merchant class. To win a majority, it must expand in the south and east, where Hindu-Muslim rivalry has little resonance, and attract backward castes in the north.

The BJP's standard-bearer, Vajpayee, is a moderate within the party, and his government adopted a centrist agenda. The only issue it implemented from the traditional BJP checklist was the nuclear tests. Vajpayee made a bold gesture in meeting his Pakistani counterpart in Lahore last

February, and despite the BJP's traditional stand, he is probably the candidate best placed to resume a serious dialogue.

The BJP is better placed to deal with Pakistan.

The BJP's alliances capitalize on local rivalries with Congress. In most of the south, the BJP has a limited presence. Its pre-election maneuvering focused more on lining up allies than on nurturing a local party base. Its lead in the polls also helps.

Congress led all of India's national governments before 1977, but it dropped from an average of 350 seats during those years to under 200 after 1989. Its "vote banks" included upper castes, backward castes, Dalits (former untouchables), and Muslims.

In the first 30 years, Congress dominated the Hindi-speaking north but also held a big share elsewhere. But Congress was nearly wiped out in the two largest states in the north in recent years. The BJP drew away large sections of the Hindu middle classes, and regional parties siphoned off backward castes and Muslims. Without a comeback in these two states — a tall order — Congress' prospects for forming a government are poor.

A split has now shaken Congress' stronghold in the third largest state. Sharad Pawar, the strongest leader in Maharashtra, was expelled after challenging Italian-born Sonia Gandhi's claim to national leadership. He takes into his Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) a bloc of votes in his state. Elsewhere, his potential strength seems greatest in areas where Congress is weak and urgently needs a comeback.

The Regional Parties: Participation in the government at the national level expands their local influence and patronage, but their priority is to keep their power base in a particular state. This puts the Congress at a disadvantage in the quest for regional party alliances. Because the Congress itself has a presence everywhere, it is often pitted at the state level against local parties whose support it seeks at the center. This problem is especially acute in the north. In Uttar Pradesh, no alliances were formed, and a complex multi-sided contest lies ahead; in Bihar, Congress reluctantly agreed to be junior partner to a local rival, the RJD.

Regional parties elsewhere have less of an anti-Congress tint, but still face competition between national and local agendas. In Tamil Nadu, the two local parties have swapped national party allies since the last election. In Andhra Pradesh, the dynamic chief minister has kept his Telegu

Desam Party allied with the BJP, but he will be fighting a tough state election at the same time, and this may affect his vote-getting power.

Key question: the staying power of new government.

The "ideological" parties have, with rare exceptions, become quite cynical about their ideology and try to cut the best deal they can with the national parties. The secular "leftist" group is split over how much support they should give to their traditional archenemy, the BJP. Here, Congress has an edge in alliance formation.

Issues to Watch:

- Government longevity: Real policy differences among the parties are relatively small. What matters more is whether the new government can make economic and other policies with a reasonable shelf life. One early indicator: how concentrated is the voting? The seats and votes held by the two largest parties combined ranged from 72 to 82 percent until the mid-1980s, but dropped below 60 percent in the last two elections.
- Pakistan: To make progress, the new prime minister needs to be personally engaged in the dialogue. Getting over the sense of betrayal generated by the fighting of the last few months will not be easy. A BJP government's nationalist credentials may help. Sonia Gandhi could be inhibited by her Italian origins.
- Governance and decentralization: The Vajpayee government's mixed record and early fall, coming after several other very short-term governments, caused disillusionment about the functioning of government. This creates an opportunity to think more boldly about India's problems of governance and the potential for unleashing the dynamism of the states. These are complex issues both institutionally and politically, but a serious effort to reexamine them now could pay rich dividends.
- Relations with the United States: The issues that set the tone for Indo-U.S. relations — dealing with Pakistan, the future of nonproliferation, and economic policy — have been the subject of an intense Indo-U.S. dialogue over the past year. The BJP team that has carried on the dialogue would probably have an easier time continuing it than the Congress. Once again, however, the more important question is the government's staying power and ability to provide policy continuity.

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