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India's 2024 National Election

Overview and Results

The United States has been developing a strategic partnership with the Republic of India for two decades, and the U.S. Congress has broadly supported that engagement. Reflecting an interest in democracy and human rights in India, some Members of Congress have raised questions about how Narendra Modi's continued political dominance and Hindu-nationalist agenda might impact its consideration and oversight of the U.S.-India partnership.

With about 970 million eligible voters, India's parliamentary democracy began its 2024 national election—again history's largest democratic exercise—in April, with seven phases over 43 days. About two-thirds of the electorate participated. On June 4, India's Election Commission announced the results of races for a new 543-seat Lok Sabha, parliament's lower house and the locus of national power. The central and near-universally-expected result was realized: continued rule for Prime Minister (PM) Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the world's largest political party. On June 8, Modi was sworn in for another five-year term, becoming only the second Indian PM to win three consecutive terms (the country's first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, accomplished this in 1962).

The outcome was also seen by many Indian and external observers as a major and surprise rebuke for Modi and his party. After ten years with a Lok Sabha majority, the BJP had aspired to further boost its dominance in 2024—its leaders targeted 400 seats, up from 303 in 2019. The BJP won only 240 seats, far short of the 272 needed for a majority. The 73-year-old Modi must for the first time rely on allies in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to form a coalition government. With those allies, the NDA will hold 293 seats, or 54% of the chamber.

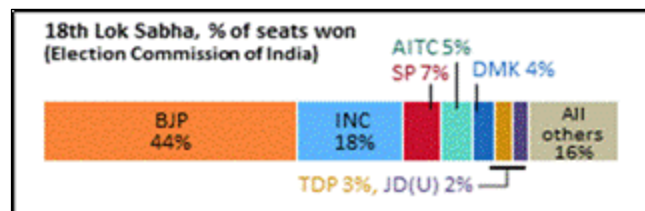
Although parties opposed to Modi/BJP rule were unable to displace it this cycle, many saw their seat share vastly outpace expectations. In mid-2023, more than two dozen opposition parties had formed the new Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or "INDIA," coalition to contest the national elections. Most prominent in this grouping was the dynastic Indian National Congress (INC or "Congress Party"), which dominated the country's politics for its first 50 years of independence. After two consecutive routs at the national level—it won only 52 seats in 2019, short even of the 55 required to officially lead the opposition—the INC nearly doubled its standing, capturing 99 seats under the campaign leadership of Rahul Gandhi, heir to a lineage of three previous Indian PMs. Another prominent INDIA member, Uttar Pradesh's Samajwadi Party (SP) won 37 seats—a more than six-fold gain over 2019—making it the chamber's third-largest party and illuminating the BJP's electoral setbacks in India's densely-

populated "Hindi belt." In sum, the INDIA alliance won 234 seats, or 43% of the chamber.

Both of the BJP's most important coalition partners—holding 16 and 12 seats, respectively—are avowedly secular, with nonideological interests firmly rooted in their respective states (Andhra Pradesh and Bihar; in 2019 the leader of the former called Modi a "terrorist"). This circumstance may lead Modi and the BJP to moderate some aspects of their previous positions, in particular those animated by Hindu nationalism.

The BJP and Congress are, in practice, India's only genuinely national parties. As in the previous cycle, they collectively won more than half of all votes cast nationwide, 37% and 21%, respectively, virtually unchanged over 2019. Yet, with the BJP's seat count dropping by more than one-fifth, India's national politics will again feature the critical influence of state-based parties, as was the case from 1996-2014. The BJP remains dominant: it won more seats than the next nine parties combined, as well as more than the INDIA alliance total.

First-time parliamentarians won 52% of the chamber's seats, and the 18th Lok Sabha will be somewhat more youthful than its predecessor (an average age of 56, down from 59). Of the total, 14% are women, a slight decline. The number of Muslim members declined from 27 to 24, none NDA supporters (Muslims comprise 14% of India's population and now hold less than 5% of Lok Sabha seats). About one-quarter of seats are held by upper-caste figures; a slight majority of seats was won by lower caste (16%), tribal (10%), and "other backward castes" (25%) combined.



Reactions and Implications

PM Modi declared victory on election day, and one senior BJP proponent affirmed the party's performance as a "vote of confidence" in its leadership, while acknowledging some voter dissatisfaction. India's major newspapers played up the opposition's unexpected successes. As election results came in, the Bombay Stock Exchange had its worst day in four years, its main index dipping by nearly 6%, with nearly \$400 billion in losses. Upon his swearing in, Modi took a consensus-seeking posture as he seated an unusually large Council of Ministers with 72 figures, 11 of them non-BJP partners.

Modi's enduring personal popularity is likely to persist, even if dented. A 2023 survey found 79% of Indians held a favorable view of the PM. Yet, on its own, Modi's charisma was not sufficient to maintain the BJP's national majority. Allegations of overconfidence and even arrogance—including his own claims that he was “sent by God”—led some analysts to conclude that Modi may have alienated some voters by making the election about himself. Some commentators castigated Modi for such bombast, as well as for excessive and divisive communal rhetoric.

India's electorate appears to have rejected Modi's vision of a one-party state, and many analysts declared that India's democracy won and was revived. The Delhi daily *Hindu* editorialized that the “verdict” was a call from the people for the BJP “to be more conciliatory and less confrontational toward the political aspirations of various communities and regions of India.” One pundit described the results as at least temporarily dispelling “the suffocating shadow of authoritarianism, and the nauseous winds of communalism.”

Some analysts contend that economic inequality and communal divisiveness put a ceiling on the electorate's goodwill toward Modi and the BJP. These two issue areas appeared central to the dynamics of the 2024 election and are likely to receive particular attention under the new government. India's has been among the world's fastest-expanding major economies for the past decade, with 8.2% growth posted for FY2023/24. Under Modi, GDP per capita increased by 55% and India became the world's 5th-largest economy during this period, up from 9th. Modi has overseen a massive upgradation of India's infrastructure, and many Indians appear enthusiastic about the country's ongoing economic expansion. Yet extensive poverty (especially in rural areas), high unemployment (especially among younger Indians), and high inflation rates were widely seen to have frustrated the BJP's electoral aspirations in 2024. Some observers assess that tackling these issues is likely to command Delhi's agenda; one views a call for more inclusive development as the central message of the electorate.

Modi, a self-avowed Hindu nationalist and purveyor of “Hindutva,” and top BJP figures have long deployed anti-Muslim rhetoric, which appears more common during election seasons. Communal hate speech—issued at times by senior BJP figures—has reportedly spiked in India since Modi became prime minister, as has online harassment by BJP proponents. The BJP's decade-long pursuit of muscular religious majoritarianism at the national level (about 80% of Indians are Hindu) has alarmed human rights watchdogs and religious freedom advocates who seek to prevent the erosion of India's syncretic and secular traditions, and may have been a further factor in BJP seat losses.

Many observers both domestically and abroad—including within the U.S. Congress—have expressed concerns about the broader status of human rights, religious freedom, and signs of antidemocratic practices and autocracy in India under Modi. In the lead-up to this election, critiques included alleged election-related malfeasance by the government. Several hundred politicians came under

government corruption investigations, 90% of them reportedly from opposition parties. An electoral bond scheme reportedly disproportionately benefitted the BJP and was declared unconstitutional by India's Supreme Court in March; opposition leader Rahul Gandhi called it a BJP “extortion racket.” In mid-March, the Congress Party accused the Modi government of crippling its campaign operations with tax investigations that froze party accounts. On the same day, Delhi's chief minister—a prominent opposition figure—was arrested for allegedly accepting bribes. (Both latter developments were “follow[ed] closely” by the U.S. State Department, which encouraged “fair, transparent, and timely legal processes for each of these issues.”) Meanwhile, throughout the campaign India's media landscape was awash in disinformation, much of it reportedly sourced to the BJP government or its activists, including deepfakes and pro-Modi fake news channels on YouTube and abroad.

Congressional Interest

On June 5, President Biden congratulated Modi and welcomed growing U.S.-India friendship. The State Department commended “Indian voters, poll workers, civil society, and journalists for their commitment and vital contributions to India's democratic processes and institutions,” and said it expects “a continued close partnership.”

The nature and trajectory of the U.S.-India partnership, described by the Biden Administration as “one of the most strategic and consequential of the 21st century,” are unlikely to change. Some analysts argue that continued Modi/BJP incumbency will be a boon to India's economic growth, and that a “chastened” Modi might benefit U.S. interests by increasing his government's reliability as a partner. Others foresee broad stability, with core drivers of economic policy unchanged. U.S. business interests that see a stake in the pace of India's economic reforms reportedly have expressed concerns that a coalition government may have less ability to drive major initiatives.

As the U.S. government remains focused on checking China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, U.S.-India security cooperation is likely to continue growing. More broadly—and even as the “Modi 3.0” government is considered likely to turn more attention inward—leaders in both capitals seek to deepen ongoing bilateral cooperation in an array of critical and emerging technologies, along with other extensive engagements.

It is unclear if PM Modi will adopt a less confrontational approach to politics in coalition, or reemphasize the communal and autocratic aspects of his agenda. If the latter, Members of Congress may remain watchful of India's course on democracy, human rights, and religious freedom. Some experts warn that the risk of authoritarianism has not vanished, that India's “re-democratization” is far from assured, and that these election results should not be viewed as a defeat of Hindutva.

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