

What are India's Voters Thinking?

Ronojoy Sen



Summary

Polling for India's seven-phase general elections began on 19 April 2024. A recently published survey provides clues to what the Indian electorate might be thinking. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi still remains very popular, voters have expressed serious concerns about economic distress.

As India heads into the first phase of a seven-phase, six-week general election on 19 April 2024, several opinion polls and surveys are doing the rounds. Some of them have predicted a [resounding victory](#) for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) though falling short of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's target of 370 seats for his party. The survey with the longest history and credibility is the one by Centre for the Studies of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti which is usually done both before and after the polls. Among other things, the survey looks at the vote share of the political parties but sensibly does not try to translate it into seats, which is always a complex task in India. [The CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll survey](#) was conducted between 28 March and 8 April 2024 across 19 states and it reached out to over 10,000 respondents.

The findings of the survey, which were published recently, are a guide to what voters might be thinking before the elections although it is also true that some of the respondents could change their mind on voting day. One of the [headline findings](#) is that if the elections were held at the time of the survey, the BJP would get 40 per cent of the vote share and the Congress 21 per cent with the Congress' allies getting 13 per cent of the vote compared to six per cent for the BJP's allies. In 2019, the BJP won 37 per cent of the vote share compared to 19 per cent for the Congress. There is, however, a north-south divide in the support for the BJP with 25 per cent of the respondents in south India supporting the BJP compared to 47 per cent in the north and west. Notably, the support for the BJP in the south is slightly up from its actual vote share in 2019.

The share of people "fully" or "somewhat" satisfied with the government though has come down from 65 per cent in 2019 to 57 per cent in 2024 with the levels of satisfaction higher in north India compared to the south. Conversely, the share of people "fully" or "somewhat" dissatisfied has gone up from 30 per cent in 2019 to 39 per cent in 2024.

However, 44 per cent of the respondents still believe that the government deserves another chance. The reasons given by the respondents are varied with 42 per cent citing "good work", 18 per cent pointing to welfare schemes and 10 per cent mentioning Modi's leadership. Though 10 per cent mentioned the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya as a reason, nearly 80 per cent of the respondents also believed that India belonged to citizens of all religions.

Modi is [way ahead of the other leaders](#) in popularity with 48 per cent of the respondents picking him as their choice for prime minister followed by Congress' Rahul Gandhi at 27 per cent. Modi's support is the highest among the upper castes and the Other Backward Classes and relatively less among the Dalits and Adivasis. His support is the least among the Muslims.

While these findings are perhaps predictable, some of the others are somewhat surprising. Nearly a quarter of the respondents chose the Ram temple as the most liked work of the Modi government with eight per cent mentioning India's international image and only two per cent singling out good governance and curbing corruption. Indeed, over half the respondents felt that corruption had increased in the last five years. On the flipside, the least liked aspects of the Modi government were [increasing unemployment and price rise](#). Indeed, unemployment is one of the biggest concerns for the respondents with two-thirds saying it has become more difficult to get a job. This view cuts across religion and caste as well as urban and rural India. The respondents blamed both the central and state governments equally for the job shortage. The survey threw up similar numbers for price rise with over 70 per cent of respondents complaining of inflation.

Though it is difficult to extrapolate the seat share of parties from the CSDS-Lokniti survey, some have attempted to do so by converting it to [315 seats for the BJP](#) and 62 for the Congress. Leaving aside the question of seats, some broad conclusions can be drawn from the survey. While there seems to be a substantial number of voters who are inclined to back the BJP and give the government another chance, there seems to be high levels of dissatisfaction with rising unemployment and inflation. One of the main weapons of the BJP in neutralising these sentiments is the prime minister's enduring popularity and cashing in on the cult of personality around him. Indeed, the BJP's manifesto, which was released on 14 April 2024, is titled '*Modi Ki Guarantee 2024*' (Modi's Guarantee 2024). This is backed by the party's formidable election machinery which relentlessly reaches out to voters and highlights the government's various achievements.

In contrast, a fragmented opposition, despite seat-sharing arrangements in states like Maharashtra, Bihar, Punjab and Tamil Nadu, has not yet been able to craft a narrative around issues like unemployment and price rise. While the BJP is still in pole position to win a clear majority, the opposition would do well to use the economic distress of voters to target the Modi government.

.

Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.