

INDIA'S LOK SABHA 2024 ELECTIONS

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Left: Wooden Chairs on Concrete Floor. Source: ©Elimende Inagella/Unsplash, 2020.

Right: Flag Hanging on Pole. Source: ©Naveed Ahmed/Unsplash, 2018.



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

3

1. THE ELECTION TIMELINE AND VOTING PROCESS

4

2. MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

7

CONCLUSION

10



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INTRODUCTION

India is a diverse and expansive country, structured as a union of states, and operating under a sovereign, secular, and democratic republic, with a parliamentary system of government. At its helm, the President serves as the constitutional head of the executive of the Union elected by both houses of Parliament for a five-year term, while the governors act as the President's representatives in the states, mirroring the Union's executive structure. The nation comprises 28 states and 8 Union Territories (UT), with each Union Territory being administered directly by the President through appointed administrators. This intricate quasi-federal administrative setup reflects the country's unique demographics, histories, cultures, languages, attire, and festivals. Understanding the geographic and cultural diversity of India is crucial, as it significantly influences the electoral processes and their outcomes, shaping the political landscape and governance of each state and UT.¹

The *Lok Sabha*, often referred to as the "House of the People", the lower house of Parliament, is a fundamental component of India's bicameral legislature, alongside the upper house called the *Rajya Sabha* or the "Council of States", playing a crucial role in the nation's governance. Established by the Indian Constitution of 1950, the Lok Sabha is directly elected by the people through universal adult suffrage, and is the primary legislative body of India, with the authority to make and pass laws that affect every aspect of Indian life.² As stipulated by the Constitution, the Lok Sabha can have up to 550 members, including 20 members representing UTs and two members of the Anglo-Indian community nominated by the President. Currently, it comprises 543 elected representatives from across the states and UTs of India. The term of each *Lok Sabha* is five years unless dissolved earlier, although this can be extended during periods of national emergency, a provision reiterating its pivotal role in governance.³

In 2024, scheduled from April 19th to June 1st, India is set to hold its general elections, a six-week long exercise in democracy which constitutes a significant logistical feat. Nearly one billion eligible voters will participate in deciding the composition of the 543 contested

¹ Government of India, 'States & UTs' (2024) <<https://knowindia.india.gov.in/states-uts/>> accessed 15 April 2024.

² Government of India, 'Lok Sabha' (2024) <<https://www.india.gov.in/my-government/indian-parliament/lok-sabha>> accessed 15 April 2024.

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Lok Sabha' (2024) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lok-Sabha>> accessed 15 April 2024.

seats in the lower house of Parliament. This electoral exercise is crucial as it determines the composition of the government and has a direct impact on the leadership of the country. The majority party or coalition (in the event that no party is able to secure a clear majority), with 272 seats, forms a government and appoints the Prime Minister from within its ranks.⁴ Historically, these elections have been a crucial test for the ruling parties' governance and policies, reflecting public satisfaction or dissent through the ballot box.

Significant for their scale and impact, the Lok Sabha elections are a major democratic exercise, observed in anticipation both nationally and internationally. The outcome invariably influences India's policy direction, ranging from economic reforms and social welfare to foreign relations. As such, these elections are not merely a political event but a pivotal moment that can alter the socioeconomic fabric of one of the world's most populous nations.⁵

I. THE ELECTION TIMELINE AND VOTING PROCESS

The 2024 elections are set to be conducted in a series of seven phases spanning from April 19th to June 1st, with the final counting of votes scheduled for June 4th. Each phase of voting involves different groups of constituencies (smaller geographic-specific divisions within a state or UTs) across India going to the polls on specific dates. This 44 day extended timeline is designed to allow the Election Commission of India (ECI), the nation's independent poll-conducting body, to facilitate a fair voting process.⁶ The necessity for this timeline stems from the logistical and security challenges intrinsic to India's diverse and expansive geography.⁷ With nearly a billion eligible voters spread across regions ranging from high mountains to remote islands, establishing accessible polling stations within reasonable distances (within two kilometres of every voter) is a pivotal but formidable task.⁸ The

⁴ Reuters, 'India's Lok Sabha election 2024: What you need to know' (16 April 2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-lok-sabha-election-2024-what-you-need-know-2024-04-15/>> accessed 16 April 2024 (Reuters: What you need to know); Astha Rajvanshi, 'Election India 2024 Guide: Results' (Time, 12 April 2024) <<https://time.com/6966257/election-india-2024-guide-results/>> accessed 16 April 2024 (Rajvanshi, Time: Election India Guide 2024).

⁵ Reuters: What you need to know (n 4); Krishna N Das, 'India's Lok Sabha election 2024: What are the key issues?' (Reuters, 15 April 2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-lok-sabha-election-2024-what-are-key-issues-2024-04-15/>> accessed 16 April 2024.

⁶ Indian Express, 'Lok Sabha Election Schedule' (16 April 2024) <<https://indianexpress.com/elections/lok-sabha-election-schedule/>> accessed 16 April 2024.

⁷ Krutika Pathi, 'India's Election Will Stretch Over 44 Days. Why Does It Take So Long?' (The Diplomat, 18 March 2024) <<https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/indias-election-will-stretch-over-44-days-why-does-it-take-so-long/>> accessed 25 April 2024 (Pathi, The Diplomat: Why Does it Take So Long?).

⁸ Ibid.

complexity necessitates the use of various modes of transport for election officials, including on foot, by boat, and horseback, especially in isolated areas.⁹

Security considerations further dictate the phased voting structure. By staggering the election dates, the ECI can effectively deploy and manage the substantial number of security personnel required to maintain order and protect against electoral fraud, especially in regions with a history of such issues.¹⁰ This approach facilitates a focused allocation of resources, ensuring each voting phase is closely monitored and conducted efficiently.¹¹

Additionally, the phased schedule accommodates the demographic variances across India's states and UTs. For instance, Uttar Pradesh requires multiple days of voting due to its large population, comparable to that of Brazil.¹² This method helps prevent the electoral system from becoming overwhelmed, thus maintaining the integrity and continuity of the voting process.¹³

The election schedule is as follows: ¹⁴

- **Phase 1 – April 19:** This is the beginning of the election process, where voting takes place in 102 constituencies spread across 21 states including diverse areas like Bihar, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and West Bengal. This phase targets a mix of regions, each with its own unique political landscape to kick off the election.
- **Phase 2 – April 26:** A week later, the second phase covers 89 constituencies across 13 different regions. This phase continues the process, ensuring that different parts of the country can participate in the elections without overwhelming the system.
- **Phase 3 – May 7:** By this phase, the election process is well underway with 94 constituencies in 12 states going to the polls within.

⁹ Krutika Pathi, 'India' National Election Will Take Place in Phases Over 44 Days. Here's Why It Takes So Long' (AP News, 15 April 2024) <<https://apnews.com/article/india-election-2024-explainer-41d7aa3131dc0c7e0df1ea4be6b6a4c7>> accessed 25 April 2024 (Pathi, AP News: Here's Why it Takes So Long).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bibhudatta Pradhan, 'India Announces Election 2024: Seven Numbers to Unpack World's Biggest Vote' (Al Jazeera, 16 March 2024) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/16/india-announces-election-2024-seven-numbers-to-unpack-worlds-biggest-vote>> accessed 25 April 2024 (Pradhan, Al Jazeera: India Announces Election 2024).

¹² Pathi, The Diplomat: Why Does it Take So Long? (n 7)

¹³ Pathi, AP News: Here's Why it Takes So Long (n 9)

¹⁴ Manu Singh, 'Lok Sabha Election Schedule 2024' (AWBI, 13 April 2024) <<https://awbi.in/lok-sabha-election-schedule-2024/>> accessed 15 April 2024 ; Election Commission of India, 'Elections 2024' (2024) <<https://elections24.eci.gov.in/>> accessed 25 April 2024.

- **Phase 4 – May 13:** This phase sees 96 constituencies across 10 states casting their votes. As the election progresses, each phase builds on the previous ones, spreading the electoral process smoothly over time and geography.
- **Phase 5 – May 20:** In this phase, 49 constituencies in 8 states participate.
- **Phase 6 – May 25:** Approaching the end of the election cycle, this phase includes 57 constituencies in 7 states.
- **Phase 7 – June 1:** This is the final phase of voting, with 57 constituencies across 8 states going to the polls. Completing the process allows the entire country to participate in deciding the next government and the stage is set for counting and results.

For elections to be free and fair, certain norms must be upheld, such as the designation of an independent election commission, free participation of all parties and voters, and equal access to the media for candidates.¹⁵ The entire process is observantly structured by the ECI to uphold the integrity of the election and ensure that the democratic process is respected. This complex electoral structure includes:¹⁶

- (a) A phased timeline of voting allows for order, high security and scrutiny;
- (b) a model code of conduct (MCC) setting guidelines (eight provisions concerning general conduct, meetings, processions, polling day, polling booths, observers, the party in power, and election manifestos) that govern the political parties and candidates during the six-week election process, preventing abuses of power and ensuring a level playing field;¹⁷
- (c) designation of 15 million electoral and security officials for monitoring and outreach purposes;¹⁸
- (d) and implementation of modern technology voting mechanisms such as Electric Voting Machines (EMV).

¹⁵ United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 'Elections' <<https://dppa.un.org/en/elections>> accessed 15 April 2024.

¹⁶ Deccan Herald, 'Explained: The Role of the Election Commission in Holding Free and Fair Elections' (12 April 2024) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/elections/india/explained-the-role-of-the-election-commission-in-holding-free-and-fair-elections-2975094#3>> accessed 15 April 2024.

¹⁷ The Hindu, 'Watch: What is the Model Code of Conduct Explained' (22 March 2024) <<https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/watch-what-is-the-model-code-of-conduct-explained/article67979789.ece>> accessed 15 April 2024.

¹⁸ Rajvanshi, Time: Election India Guide 2024 (n 4).

The voting process for the elections involves the use of 5.5 million EVMs at 1.05 million polling stations, which have been a staple in Indian elections since their widespread adoption in the early 2000s.¹⁹ These machines are used to address electoral fraud and simplify the voting process.²⁰ To cast a vote, every voter is required to present a valid identification, typically a Voter ID card issued by the Election Commission of India. This requirement helps prevent voter fraud and ensures that only eligible voters can participate in the election. Provisions are made for absentee voting to accommodate voters who cannot be present at their designated polling stations. This includes postal voting for certain categories of people, such as the armed forces and government officials stationed outside their constituencies. Moreover, special arrangements are made to assist elderly and disabled voters, ensuring that everyone has equal access to the voting process.²¹

II. MAIN PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

India's multiparty system features an extensive array of political organisations that cater to a wide spectrum of regional and national interests. With around 2660 registered political parties, India's political landscape is one of the most diverse in the world. Each party is identified by a unique symbol, an essential feature in a country where literacy rates vary, helping voters to easily recognise their preferred candidates.²²

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, seven national parties, 43 state parties and 623 unrecognised candidates participated. A party gains national status when it demonstrates a significant presence across multiple states, while state party recognition requires a substantial footprint within at least one state legislature.²³ Of the 543 seats contested, over 70 percent were secured by candidates from national parties illustrating the dominance of major coalitions like the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), led by the two major national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) respectively.

¹⁹ Pradhan, Al Jazeera: India Announces Election 2024 (n 11).

²⁰ Shamika Ravi, 'How Electronic Voting Machines Have Improved India's Democracy' (Brookings, 6 December 2019) <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-electronic-voting-machines-have-improved-indias-democracy/>> accessed 16 April 2024.

²¹ Deccan Herald, 'Lok Sabha Elections 2024 FAQs: What Are the Different Methods of Voting' (27 March 2024) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/elections/india/lok-sabha-elections-2024-faqs-what-are-the-different-methods-of-voting-2954344#1>> accessed 15 April 2024.

²² Pradhan, Al Jazeera: India Announces Election 2024 (n 11).

²³ Ibid.

The political arena is dominated by the following key players. Each of these parties present distinct visions in their respective manifestos, addressing a range of crucial issues from economic reforms and governance to social inclusiveness and human rights.

1. **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**

The BJP, led by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, and ruling the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), remains a formidable force in Indian politics. Founded in 1980, the BJP emerged from the Akhil Bharatiya Jana Sangh, an Indian nationalist political party, which was itself an offshoot of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) formed in 1925, a men-only right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation.²⁴ After decades of gradual ascent, the BJP secured a significant parliamentary majority in 2014 under Modi's leadership. Narendra Modi has remained at the party's forefront since then and is pursuing an unprecedented third term, in which it is highly predicted his party will succeed. This is attributed to the strong Hindu majority support that has seen handouts from the BJP and its leaders, and backed by the nation's strong economic growth.²⁵ His governance has been marked by pro-Hindu policies, significant economic initiatives, and national security emphasis, which have bolstered his popularity and stirred controversy over their implications on secularism, minority rights, and a clampdown on free speech and expression.²⁶

Key figures:

- **Narendra Modi:** The current PM, hailing from Gujarat, previously its Chief Minister, and a member of the RSS, is known for his charismatic leadership and has been a central figure in BJP's strategy, emphasising economic growth and Hindu nationalist themes.²⁷
- **Amit Shah:** India's Home Minister since 2019, known for his pivotal role in major policy decisions including the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status and

²⁴ Reuters, 'India's Lok Sabha Election 2024: Main Political Parties & Candidates' (16 April 2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-lok-sabha-election-2024-main-political-parties-candidates-2024-04-16/>> accessed 16 April 2024 (Reuters: Main Political Parties).

²⁵ Ibid. ; Shivangi Acharya, 'With Handouts, Piped Water, Cooking Gas, India's Modi Woos Women Voters' (Reuters, 28 February 2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/with-handouts-piped-water-cooking-gas-indias-modi-woos-women-voters-2024-02-28/>> accessed 15 April 2024.

²⁶ Al Jazeera, 'India: What You Need to Know About India's Opposition Alliance' (26 July 2023) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/26/india-what-you-need-to-know-about-indias-opposition-alliance>> accessed 15 April 2024.

²⁷ Reuters: Main Political Parties (n 24).

the contentious adoption of the Citizen Amendment Act.²⁸

2. **Indian National Congress (INC)**

The INC, India's oldest political party, has been the main threat to the BJP's dominance. Historically, it has led India through the majority of its post-independence years, introducing significant economic and social reforms in favour of an open market economy.²⁹ The party has positioned itself as a defender of the "idea of India" that embraces diversity and pluralism. The party leads the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) which consists of more than a dozen opposition parties.³⁰ However, Congress has struggled to regain its footing after losing its power in 2014, marred by internal leadership challenges and corruption allegations.

Key figures:

- **Rahul Gandhi**: A central figure in the party, and four-time parliament member, Rahul has led Congress through turbulent times.³¹ Despite setbacks, he remains a key voice against the BJP, focusing on social justice, economic inequality, and inclusivity.

3. **Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)**

Emerging from an anti-corruption movement in 2011, AAP or “Common Person's Party”, has established itself as a significant player in Indian politics, particularly in Delhi and Punjab state where it has formed the government.³² During its leadership, it has focused on anti-corruption, education, and health reforms and gained recognition for its emphasis on transparency and urban governance. Despite recent legal challenges and arrests of its leaders, AAP continues to appeal to voters disillusioned with traditional party politics.

Key figures:

²⁸ Ibid. ; Reuters, 'CAA: Why is India's Citizenship Law Contentious?' (13 March 2024)

<<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/caa-why-is-indias-citizenship-law-contentious-2024-03-13/>> accessed 15 April 2024.

²⁹ Al Jazeera, 'India Election 2024: Which Are the Main Political Parties in the Fray' (16 April 2024)

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/16/india-election-2024-which-are-the-main-political-parties-in-the-fray>> accessed 16 April 2024 (Jazeera: India Election 2024).

³⁰ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'India's 2024 General Election: What to Know' (Council on Foreign Relations, 2 April 2024)

<<https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/indias-2024-general-election-what-know>> accessed 16 April 2024.

³¹ Jazeera: India Election 2024 (n 29).

³² Times of India, 'Lok Sabha Elections 2024 Full Schedule: Delhi to Vote in Phase 6 on May 25' (16 April 2024)

<<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/lok-sabha-elections-2024-full-schedule-delhi-to-vote-in-phase-6-on-may-25/articleshow/108647649.cms>> accessed 16 April 2024 ; Reuters: Main Political Parties (n 24).

- Arvind Kejriwal: The Chief Minister of Delhi and a former civil servant, Kejriwal's governance model in Delhi focuses on accessibility and reforms in public services, receiving conflicting praise.

4. **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Trinamool Congress (TMC)**

These regional powerhouses play crucial roles in their respective states, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, and are key to forming coalitions at the national level. DMK, a congress ally and third-largest party in terms of parliamentary seats, focuses on state autonomy and social welfare, while TMC, the fourth-largest, known for its populist measures, emphasises regional pride and opposition to BJP's central policies.³³

Key figures:

- M.K. Stalin: Leading DMK, Stalin has continued his family's legacy, promoting Tamil culture and welfare-oriented governance.
- Mamata Banerjee: The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Banerjee is known for her populist measures and strong resistance to BJP's influence in her state.

CONCLUSION

As the 2024 Lok Sabha election unfolds across India in the coming six weeks, this democratic exercise is set to shape not only the immediate future of India's governance but also its long-term policy direction and adherence to human rights. Through a detailed examination of the electoral process and the various phases that organise this vast undertaking, we gain insight into how India orchestrates one of the world's largest and most complex electoral systems. Each phase ensures that every corner of the nation has a voice, reflecting the unique political, social, and cultural fabric of the states and UTs that comprise India.

Moving forward, as the election progresses, further analysis will delve into India's electoral integrity, democratic health, political context, and human rights implications. It will evaluate

³³ Ibid. ; Jazeera: India Election 2024 (n 29)

how the strategies and ideologies of the key players influence electoral outcomes and impact the Indian population, by assessing each of the main parties' accomplishments, challenges, and breaches of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Ultimately, the implications of these elections will resonate far beyond the immediate results, also affecting socio-economic policies, national unity, and India's position on the global stage. The South and East Asia team at GHRD will continue to cover these developments as the election in India progresses providing insight and analyses on what these elections mean for the future of India and its effect on the rights and freedoms of individuals in it.

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