

Do Issues Matter in Indian Elections?

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ABSTRACT

Do Indian voters think about election issues before voting? If so, how closely do they relate the issues to the party that raised them, and how likely are they to vote for that party? The paper analyses national survey data by Lokniti- Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, for the two most prominent parties, Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from 2014 and 2019 national elections and finds that election issues do have an importance in the minds of the voters. We have evidence to suggest that BJP was able to strike the ‘issue-based electoral chord’ with the voters in 2014 and succeeded. However, in 2019, we have evidence that even though the prominent issues were the same, only a few issues out of those significantly mattered to the voters (price rise and unemployment) and shifted their voting preference against the incumbent government. We also explore how voters’ choice of political party may have varied on the basis of other demographic factors such as caste, religion, education etc.

Keywords: election issue, political parties, democracy, voting

¿Importan los problemas en las elecciones indias?

RESUMEN

¿Los votantes indios piensan en cuestiones electorales antes de votar? Si es así, ¿qué tan estrechamente se relacionan los problemas con el partido que los planteó y qué tan probable es que voten por ese partido? El documento analiza los datos de la encuesta nacional del Centro Lokniti para el Estudio de las Sociedades en Desarrollo, para los dos partidos más prominentes, el Congreso Nacional Indio y el Partido Bharatiya Janata (BJP) de las elecciones nacionales de 2014 y 2019, y encuentra que los temas electorales tienen una importancia en las mentes de los votantes. Tenemos evidencia que sugiere que BJP fue capaz de alcanzar el ‘acorde electoral basado en el tema’ con los votantes en 2014 y tuvo éxito. Sin embargo, en 2019, tenemos evidencia de que, aunque los problemas importantes fueron los mismos, solo unos pocos de los que importaron significativamente a los votantes (aumento de precios y desempleo) y cambiaron su preferencia de voto en contra del gobierno en ejercicio. También exploramos cómo la elección de los votantes del partido político puede haber variado en función de otros factores demográficos como la casta, la religión, la educación, etc.

Palabras clave: Elección, partidos políticos, democracia, votación

议题在印度选举中重要吗？

摘要

印度选民在投票前会思考选举议题吗？如果是的话，他们在多大程度上将议题与提出议题的党派相联系，他们为该党派投票的可能性有多大？本文分析了由发展中心社会研究中心的 Lokniti 研究项目所收集的全国调研数据，针对 2014 年和 2019 年全国大选中印度国民大会党和印度人民党（BJP）这两大最重要党派的数据，发现选举议题的确在选民心中占据重要位置。我们的证据暗示，BJP 在 2014 年曾能让选民想起基于议题的选举，并成功当选。然而在 2019 年，我们的证据表明，尽管显著的议题与 2014 年一样，但仅有一些议题对选民而言尤为重要（价格上涨与失业）并使其投票偏好不利于现任政府。我们还探究了选民对政党的选择可能如何在基于例如种姓、宗教、教育等其他人口因素的情况下发生改变。

关键词：选举议题，政党，民主，投票

I. Introduction

In Indian politics, electoral issues play an important role in projecting the vital concerns of the electorate in conveying the primary needs of voters: i.e., what do the voters want? These issues may be raised by opposition parties (good governance issues raised against the Congress Party in 2014 national elections); by the incumbent government, showcasing their achievements and performance throughout their term (issues of improved educational and health facilities by the Aam Aadmi Party in 2020 Delhi elections); or by incidents immediately preceding the elections (issues of security and defending national pride amid attacks by terrorist groups and India's retaliation just before the 2019 national elections). The present paper¹ therefore probes whether voters consider such issues while voting or not, and if they do, which political party do they vote for?² It assesses some of the major election issues of the last two general elections (2014 and 2019) in the context of the two largest national parties of India, the Indian National Congress (Congress) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).³

Political parties in India seldom overlook the socialistic and welfare concerns of the electorate. A lot of the issues raised during elections and in party manifestos endorse the concerns of poor and marginalized citizens, which is appropriate when more than 70 million people in India live in extreme poverty.⁴ Uprooting poverty through direct measures, such as public provision of income or food or assets to the poor,

has been lucrative to political parties, as these issues are of short-term gain and more visible in comparison to indirect methods mediated through high economic growth, which need a longer time to materialize and to be beneficial for voters.⁵ This is the reason that many parties target welfare services for the poor, fulfilling basic needs during election campaigns and between elections.⁶

There have been many studies elaborating the Indian voters' participation in elections and linking their social identities, such as caste, locality, gender, education, etc., to their voting behavior.⁷ Political parties can be seen cashing in on these identities during elections, for their benefit. Elliott, in an ethnographic narrative of the 2009 Assembly Elections in Andhra Pradesh, shows how political parties tried to provide huge "benefits" to the voters by promising them televisions, cash transfer schemes, and a host of other welfare schemes, such as widow pensions, housing subsidies, tuition reimbursement for poor backward caste students, etc.⁸ However, we have less evidence on whether the issues raised (either by incumbent or opposition parties) during elections are the ones that voters actually ponder and that may lead to their voting choice. It is often perceived that election issues raised at political rallies and during media campaigns largely address the concerns of voters. Each political party is well aware of the demands of the voters and tries to project itself as their only savior. While each party sets an agenda prior to every election and updates their manifestos accordingly, we do not have conclusive

evidence to show that voters respond to it the way political parties expect them to.

In this light, the present paper explores the voting behavior of Indian citizens in relation to the issues raised during general elections, and how closely the voters feel that they were important issues for them, to the extent that they affected their voting choice. We look at the National Election Studies (NES) survey data from *Lokniti*-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) for 2014 and 2019. The paper is divided into four sections. We start by giving a brief overview of the issues that were prominent during the previous two general elections, and then present a descriptive analysis of the issues raised during the general elections of 2014 and 2019, with respect to some of the demographic details of voters, such as caste, class, religion, gender, etc. This is followed by an analysis of the above-mentioned variables with voting patterns for Congress and the BJP through a logistic regression model. The paper concludes with a discussion of the analysis.

II. The Role of Issues in Indian Elections Over Time

The debate among Marxist and liberal scholars of political science on determining voter behavior is on the question of whether voting is a determinant of class or of free will of the voter, and therefore largely issue-based.⁹ National and state elections in India have been contested

on a range of issues, such as basic amenities, price increase, corruption, and economic reforms, to religious issues, including *Ram* temple and *Ram setu* (bridge), secularism, the rights of forest dwellers, reservations to deprived communities in education and jobs, development, etc. We observe no set pattern of issues raised during general elections, although some commonalities are noticed. This section attempts to provide a brief overview of the prominent elections since independence and provides a retrospective context of the circumstances under which the elections took place and the issues the voters responded to during those elections.

Looking back at the very first general election that took place in independent India, it was supposedly the personalities and the common man's notion of the kind of government that they wanted for their country, which were highlighted as the most important concerns of the people,¹⁰ with the Congress Party stressing emotional issues, old loyalties, caste, ethnic groups, and communal feelings.¹¹ By the late 1960s, Palmer observes that for most voters, the issues had become more local or regional, as per the constituencies. The larger issues of the survival of Indian democracy, economic development, or foreign policy did not seem to figure among the top priorities.¹² Even the leading national dailies observed that the people of the country were more concerned with parochial issues.¹³ It was during the election of 1971 that Indira Gandhi attempted to bring out issues of national importance and steered away from the politics of patronage.¹⁴

After the emergency imposed by Mrs. Gandhi in 1975, the elections of the late 1970s were clouded by the “ending of emergency” by the opposition parties, whereas Congress remained committed to justifying it.¹⁵ It was clear where the national mood lay, although the opposition parties could not hold the fort for very long, and national elections had to take place again in 1980. It is also widely acknowledged that Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination brought the sympathy vote to Congress in 1984.¹⁶

The elections in 1996 were supposed to be on the issue of liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) due to the economic reforms introduced in 1991. In opposition to this, the incumbent government deliberately ignored the issue of economic reform and instead professed the idea of political stability. The opposition parties viewed corruption as an important election issue to raise for their support.¹⁷ Evidently, one of the biggest economic reforms in post-independence India did not become an election issue in the subsequent general elections because the incumbent and opposition parties thought of economic reforms as non-substantial that could be beneficial electorally.

The promise of a stable government at the center became the prominent electoral issue across all political parties in the late 1990s. The BJP’s campaign slogan was “a stable party and an able leader,” with a commitment to provide good governance.¹⁸ Kapur notices that the *Kargil* victory did not play a significant role in the voters’ decisions,

despite its deep social resonance.¹⁹ Neither did the BJP’s attempts to play up Sonia Gandhi as being a naturalized “foreigner” pay off as a vote catcher in the 2004 elections.

In the 2004 general elections, the BJP, after running a coalition government at the center and successfully completing the term, was confident of its performance, and contested the election on its overall economic performance. The “India Shining” campaign of the party was a reflection of its conviction of winning the election. Hence “the decision of the BJP to contest the forthcoming general election by piggybacking on the reform-driven economic boom assumed considerable significance.”²⁰ For the very first time, the general election was contested on economic issues, which was evident from the speeches during election rallies. However, the campaign failed to bring in votes for the incumbent party.

Since the 1996 general election, a primary survey has been conducted by the CSDS, the NES, in order to understand the mood and behavior of Indian voters. With the help of this data, a few studies highlight how important the issues have been during elections, and how they affect their voting behavior.²¹ For example, Suri finds that the “perceptions of the people on economic issues (such as liberalization, privatization etc.), do matter in deciding whom they vote for.”²² He further states that one “implication of these findings is that political parties cannot afford to be indifferent to the economic perceptions of voters.”

Table 1: Voters prioritization of issues in election, 2009 (in percentages)

Issues in the election	Not Heard	Heard	
		Affected decision to vote	Made no difference to the vote
Price Increase	27	48	23
Terrorist Attacks	34	39	24
Livelihood/Employment	46	34	21
Farmer Suicides	49	28	21
Reservations for OBCs	56	22	19
Indo-US Nuclear Deal	59	18	21
<i>Ram-Setu</i> Controversy	64	17	18

Source: Authors' calculation based on Lokniti-CSDS NES 2009.

N=36629. Heard = Affected decision to vote, Made no difference to the vote, and No opinion

After the general election of 2009, the NES asked voters' opinions about seven issues that seemed to have been relevant in the election year.²³ While expressing their solidarity with some of the issues, Table 1 shows that almost 60 percent of Indian voters had never heard about the Indo-US nuclear deal, 64 percent had not heard of the *Ram Setu* controversy, about five out of 10 voters considered price increase to be an issue that affected their vote preference, and close to 40 percent of voters believed incidents of terrorist attacks in 2009 influenced their voting. In relation to the general election of 2009, Rai observes that those respondents who considered price increase, terrorist attacks, farmer suicides, and employment to be important issues tended to vote less for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) (as compared to those who said these were not an issue), since these issues

were raised by the opposition parties to discredit the UPA.²⁴

In the past two general elections held in 2014 and 2019, the NES asked the following direct question: *What was the single most important issue for you while voting in this election?* In 2014, 78 percent of the voters responded to this question by naming a specific issue that they thought had affected their voting choice (76 percent in 2019). Table 2 provides an insight into the responses of this question from 2014 and 2019, and a similar question was asked in 2009. While price increase and unemployment remained two of the most important issues in both general elections, corruption was second place in 2014. This was a reflection of a series of corruption charges against the incumbent UPA government, and the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP cashing in on it

Table 2: Top Four Issues in Elections, 2009, 2014, and 2019 in Percentages

	Most Important Issues, 2019	Most Important Issues, 2014	Important Problem of Voters Government Must Solve, 2009
1	Development (15)	Price Increase (20)	Drinking Water (17)
2	Un/Employment (11)	Corruption (12)	Unemployment (14)
3	Price Rise (4)	Development (10)	Price Increases (9)
4	Corruption (3)	Un/Employment (8)	Electricity (7)

Source: Authors' Calculation based on Lokniti-CSDS, NES (2009, 2014, 2019).

For 2019, n=24034, 2014, n=22295, 2009, n=7347.

by making it an election issue. In 2019, although price increase and corruption were among the top four election issues, less than 4 percent of the voters considered them to be their most important election issue.

We have further evidence from NES about the respondents' beliefs about the party they thought raised the issues that mattered to the voters in 2014. The BJP tops the list, with 25 percent support from respondents, followed by Congress at 15 percent (for the 2019 general election, this question was not included).

Election Issues and Party Manifesto

Electoral issues mentioned in party manifestos or during election campaigns by incumbent government or opposition parties are of much importance as they decide the priorities of political parties when one (on its own or in coalition with other parties) comes to power. Whether a party (or parties) follows the promises made in the elections or not depends on sev-

eral grounds, including intentions, ideology, pressure from international financial institutions and homegrown industries, and political constraints arising due to forming a coalition. For instance, in his speech after becoming the Chief Minister of Delhi for the second time on February 14, 2015, Arvind Kejriwal mentioned people are looking to see that the government intends to fulfill the promises made.²⁵ It has also been mapped that Kejriwal was able to bring “commonplace issues,” such as corruption and governance, to the forefront and make them national issues in a state election, instead of taking advantage of social cleavages, or noting other state-level issues, as is the trend with political newcomers.²⁶ To understand the priorities and issues raised during elections by two dominant political parties in 2014 and 2019, we analyze in Table 3 their manifestos and the issues mentioned there.

The issues presented here in order of appearance in the manifestos that might reflect the hierarchy/priority of

Table 3: Election Manifesto of BJP and Congress Party, 2019 and 2014

The BJP Election Manifesto		The Congress Party Election Manifesto	
2019	2014	2019	2014
Nation First: National Security- Art 370 and 35A Abrogation	Price Increase	<i>Kaam</i> : Employment and Growth (jobs, infrastructure, etc.)	Secular Liberal Nationalism
Agriculture and Farmer Welfare: Doubling Farmers' Income	Employment	<i>Daam</i> : NYAY (farmer, taxation reforms)	High Foreign Investment
India as the World's 3rd Largest Economy: 5 Trillion-Dollar Economy	Corruption	<i>Shaan (Pride)</i> : National and Internal Security	Low Inflation
Infrastructure: Rail, Road, Energy	Food Security	<i>Sushashan</i> : Good Governance	Minimum Wage Laws
Health for All	Social Justice and Empowerment	<i>Swabhiman</i> : Self- Esteem for the Deprived (gender, SC/ ST)	GST
Good Governance	Social Security	<i>Samman</i> : A Life of Dignity for All (healthcare, education, food security)	Employment
Yuva Bharat (Young India): Tomorrow's India	Female Empowerment		Right to Health
Education for All	Health/Education		Female Empowerment
Female Empowerment	Economic Revival		Safeguarding Minorities
Ensuring Justice for All	Agriculture		Education for All
Cultural Heritage: Ram <i>Mandir</i> , Conserving <i>Bharatiya</i> Faith and Culture	Low-Cost Housing		Accelerating Growth
Foreign Policy: <i>Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam</i>	National Security		Farmer Welfare
	Ram <i>Mandir</i> /Sethu/ Cow		Housing/Infrastructure
			Corruption
			Internal Security

Source: Authors' compilation from <http://www.bjp.org/>; <http://inc.in/>.

the issues. In 2019, Congress's manifesto prioritized employment, Minimum Income Support Programme or *Nyuntam Aay Yojana* (NYAY), and national security. However, for the BJP, the issue of national security topped the list. Months before the general election, the attack in Pulwama (India) and India's retaliation against Pakistan, led by the incumbent government, steered the election narrative towards national security and seemed to have helped them electorally.²⁷

In 2014, the BJP fought the election on price increase, employment, and corruption (which were the top three issues according to voters in the NES survey as well) and Congress prioritized the issues of secularism, Foreign Direct Investment, low inflation, minimum wage laws, and employment. Corruption as an issue was at the bottom of Congress's manifesto for the general election of 2014. In retrospect, it is evident that in the general election of 2014, the BJP's manifesto better reflected the voters' choices of issues, or perhaps the party successfully made them the issues of voters.

III. Data and Variables

The paper takes data from the NES of 2019 and 2014, as collected by Lokniti-CSDS.²⁸ For the purpose of understanding the voter's behavior related to issues, the two largest national parties, Congress and the BJP were selected for analysis, excluding their allies at the time of election. The sample for the present analysis consists of only those parliamentary constituen-

cies where there was a contest between Congress and the BJP.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the response to the question *Whom did you vote for?* The dependent variable has the values of 1=Voted for BJP and 0=Voted for Congress. Any respondent who mentioned voting for any other party except for Congress and BJP was left out of the analysis.

Independent Variable

Responses to the question *According to you, which was the single most important issue while voting?* were the independent variable. The analysis consists of the top four election issues, mentioned by the respondents/voters, with reference to "any other issue" mentioned by the voters. Any respondent who did not mention an issue was left out of the analysis.

Further, some demographic variables are also considered in the model, such as gender (coded as male and female), religion (coded for Hindus, Muslims, and other religions), caste (coded for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward classes, and all other castes), monthly household income of voters as reported by the respondent (coded into two variables of below and above Rs. 5000), locality of residence of the respondent (coded into rural areas and urban areas, which include towns, cities, and metropolitan cities), age of the respondent (coded into youths and others, as youths and first time voters are expected to vote differently than others; those who are between 18–29

years of age are considered youths), and education (coded into non-literate and those who report any education level).

IV. Factors Affecting Responses to Election Issues and Voting Choices

In this section, we highlight how different demographic characteristics such as caste, class, gender, religion, etc. affect the opinion of respondents on whether they gave importance to an issue while voting or not. Figure 1 presents the voters' demography details vis-à-vis their responses to mentioning an issue that was important to them while voting. If a voter responded to the question by mentioning an issue, they were categorized under "issues," and if they did not mention any issue, they were categorized under "no issues." Figure 1 displays those respondents who volunteered an issue. The intention for including this is to acknowledge that demographic characteristics play a role in determining whether a respondent would be more likely to mention an issue that would influence their voting choice or not. This ties up with many recent studies on Indian elections that note that demographic factors play an important role in determining voter choices, even though the voting preferences within each group may not be homogenous. For example, Kumar notes that within the Indian society that many parties are rooted in particular castes, and they mention them as their social base, which is quite useful for political mobilization in present-day politics.²⁹ He mentions that "caste re-

mains an important consideration of the voting choices for a sizeable number of voters." Similarly, Deshpande argues that even though women do not vote as a bloc, or homogenously,³⁰ their voting choices are different from that of their male counterparts.³¹ We also have an acknowledgement by Kailash of the fact that "*bahujans* (scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, poor, women and rural respondents) are less likely to offer a political opinion, than their counterparts."³²

In light of the above findings, Figure 1 shows that in the 2014 and 2019 elections, a greater number of male respondents were likely to consider some election issue while voting than their female counterparts. Similarly, a slightly higher percentage of Hindus were likely to mention electoral issues as compared to their Muslim counterparts. We also observe a difference in the percentage of OBC respondents who were more likely to provide an electoral issue that influenced their voting, followed by the Other Caste respondents, and SC respondents in 2014. It is however noteworthy that there were hardly any differences when it came to expressing an opinion on electoral issues in 2019 among respondents from different castes. Even through the lens of locality of residence of the respondent, we see that there is only a 4-percentage point difference between urban and rural respondents in 2014. This difference lowered to 2 percentage points in 2019.

We see similar responses from the youth and the literates, as compared to their counterparts in 2014 and 2019. However, note that there is a large differ-

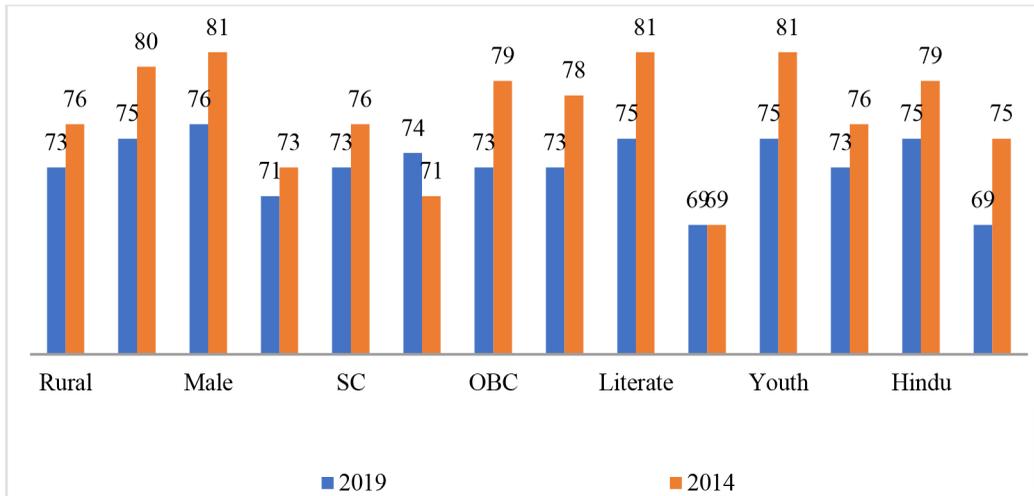


Fig 1: Electoral issues and demography of voters in 2019 and 2014 general elections

Source: Authors’ calculation based on Lokniti-CSDS NES 2014, 2019 post-poll studies. For 2014: n=22295 (n=20294 in case of Hindu/Muslim, n=22235 for Youth/Non-Youth, and n=22079 for Literate/Illiterate categories). For 2019, n=24034. All figures are in percentages and rounded.

ence in the response to “issues” between the literate and non-literate categories. We observe the highest difference between the two categories during the 2014 elections, where there is a 12-percentage point difference (literate being higher) between the two categories of respondents. However, this difference comes down to 6 percentage points in the 2019 general election.

While understanding the significance of the education level of voters and its influence on their thinking about issues while voting, NES 2014 and 2019 data show that with an increase in the educational level of the respondents, they were more likely to mention issues that affected their voting. A detailed analysis of the education categories shows that respondents with the education of college level and above showed about 17 percentage points more consideration for election issues

than their non-literate counterparts (in 2014). Even primary education made a difference to thinking about issues while voting, as respondents with primary education were 7 percentage points more likely to mention an issue than their non-literate counterparts (in 2019). However, it should be noted that even non-literate respondents reported high responses to thinking about issues while voting (69 percent in 2014 and 67 percent in 2019), which further increased with incremental levels of education, finally peaking at 78 percent in 2014 and 86 percent in 2019 for those with a college education and above.

To further elaborate on the Voting on Issues variable, we analyze the vote for Congress and the BJP based on specific issues mentioned by respondents during elections. Table 4 presents the logistic regression of the BJP and Congress with the top four issues that

voters considered the most important while voting in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, contrasted with any other issue mentioned by the respondent. As mentioned in the previous section, the dependent variable takes on two values: 1=Voted for BJP and 0=Voted for Congress. In the 2014 general election, respondents for whom the top four issues mattered the most while voting (as compared to any other issues mentioned) were significantly more likely to vote for the BJP than Congress. When we look at the disaggregated picture for issues, male respondents in 2014 were more likely to vote for the BJP than the female respondents were. With Muslims as the reference category, Hindus and respondents from other religions were more likely to vote for the BJP in

2014 than Congress. When compared to all other (non-minority) castes, the minority castes of SC, ST, and OBC were significantly less likely to vote for the BJP in 2014 elections. The income of the respondent did not come up as a significant determinant of voting for the BJP in 2014. With urban locality as a reference category, if the respondent was from a rural locality, they were less likely to vote for the BJP. For the education variable, we find interesting results, where education does not seem to play a statistically significant role in determining voter choice for a party for the said election. Similarly, young respondents of 18 to 29 years of age do not show a significant preference of voting for the BJP as compared to their older counterparts.

Table 4: Logistic regression of vote for the BJP/ Congress with top four important election issues and other variables in the 2019 and 2014 general elections

Vote for BJP/Congress as dependent variable

1= Vote for BJP, 0=Vote for Congress

Variables	Vote for BJP 2014	Vote for BJP 2019
Other Issues	Ref.	Ref.
Price Rise	0.122*** (0.013)	-0.161*** (0.026)
Corruption	0.162*** (0.015)	-0.013 (0.026)
Unemployment	0.096*** (0.017)	-0.039** (0.015)
Development	0.057*** (0.017)	0.015 (0.012)
Female	Ref.	Ref.
Male	0.018* (0.010)	0.004 (0.010)

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Muslim	Ref.	Ref.
Hindu	0.502***	0.545***
	(0.016)	(0.018)
Others Religions	0.364***	0.183***
	(0.027)	(0.025)
Other Castes	Ref.	Ref.
SC	-0.144***	0.083***
	(0.015)	(0.022)
ST	-0.041***	-0.136***
	(0.018)	(0.016)
OBC	-0.041*	-0.034***
	(0.018)	(0.012)
Income less than Rs. 5000/-	Ref.	Ref.
Income more than Rs. 5000/-	0.009	-0.054***
	(0.010)	(0.014)
Urban locality	Ref.	Ref.
Rural locality	-0.063**	0.036***
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Non-literate	Ref.	Ref.
Up-to primary	-0.016	0.009
	(0.015)	(0.016)
Up-to matric	0.016	0.026*
	(0.014)	(0.015)
College and above	0.019	0.076***
	(0.016)	(0.016)
Non-Youth	Ref.	Ref.
Youth	0.018	0.025*
	(0.012)	(0.013)
Constant	0.160***	0.227***
	(0.023)	(0.026)

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; CI, standard error is given in the bracket. For 2014, n=8,084 and 7,143 for 2019.

Independent Variable- Top four issues Vs Other Issues

Variable of Issues where 'no response' was provided has not been included

In the 2019 general election, price increase and unemployment were two significant issues that steered the votes away from the BJP. Corruption and development did not show up as significant variables to determine vote choice. This becomes significant in light of a newspaper report³³ that mentioned that in an unprompted question regarding the most important issue for the respondent while voting in this election, 12 percent of the respondents interviewed across the country (for the Lokniti NES Survey) answered unemployment. It was only when asked a specific closed-ended question about joblessness that most of the respondents said that it was a serious issue for them. Newspaper reports also showed that although unemployment and price increase weighed heavily on the voters' mind, it was the presence of other factors, such as schemes for underprivileged persons, providing LPG cylinders, constructing toilets for the rural population, etc., that were successful in garnering votes for the BJP.³⁴ Gender turned out to be not a significant variable in determining votes for BJP in 2019, as compared to 2014. The results of the religion variable matched those of 2014. In the caste variable, the ST and OBC respondents imitated the 2014 results and were significantly less likely to vote for the BJP than their non-minority counterparts. However, the SC results show a significant positive vote for the BJP in 2019 elections. Respondents with income more than Rs. 5000 were significantly less likely to vote for the BJP in 2019 than their counterparts. Rural residents changed

their preferences from 2014 and were significantly more likely to vote for the BJP than urban respondents. The education variable again provides interesting results for 2019, where matric and above educated respondents were significantly more likely to vote for the BJP. The same result holds true for youth respondents as well. Even though the top-most issues were same in both the 2014 and 2019 general elections, our analysis shows that people who thought about the issues and the performance of the BJP government over the last five years were less likely to vote for the BJP in 2019, as compared to 2014. Despite this, the BJP secured one of the highest mandates in the history of Indian elections in 2019.

V. Conclusion

This paper highlights how issues mold voter preferences during elections and while casting their votes. Political parties set the election tone by invoking important issues, which may be based on their favorable performance over the last few years. Similarly, for the opposition parties, these issues could include either an underperformance/underachievement of the incumbent government or a promise to achieve more than the incumbent, given a chance. The latter was the case in 2014 elections by the BJP, where it highlighted many lacunae of the incumbent Congress government and was able to gather support for its promise to perform better on the said issues. Discounting the importance of issues for the 2009 elections, Jaffrelot and Ver-

niers argue that “ethnic voting” continues to prevail over issue-based voting, caste-based mobilization remains at the heart of parties’ electoral strategies, and voting patterns show no sign of shifting toward more issue-based platforms.³⁵

However, in case of the 2014 and 2019 general elections, this paper does not fully endorse the view cited above. We find that the top four issues play a significant role in determining the vote for BJP in 2014, whereas in 2019, respondents who thought about the issues of unemployment and price increase tended to move their vote away from the BJP, since they felt that the incumbent had not fared well on these parameters. Development and corruption, while still featuring among the top issues, are not significant predictors of the BJP vote in 2019. However, we feel that issues may not be the only determining factor in a diversified electoral democracy like India. Thachil finds through primary survey and fieldwork that in different parts of India, different strategies may work for “elite political parties” to garner votes of the poor. In some places, ethnic cleavages could be exploited; in others, poor voters could

be provided “elite-centered patronage;” and in still others, a welfare- and service-based approach may be better at garnering political support.

Given that the elections are a mandate of the people, possible alternate speculations can be made regarding the reason that voters’ issue preferences do not translate into voting choice for parties other than the BJP (in this case, Congress). First, the voters may have wanted to give the BJP-led NDA government another chance in office to fulfill the promises it had made. Second, there may have been no appropriate alternate present apart from the BJP. Finally, there may have been something else altogether that was going on in the minds of the voters that was not captured by this survey. In conclusion, we would like to highlight the fact that the importance of issues during elections can neither be discounted nor overlooked in a robust democracy such as India’s, although there may be many other factors playing out at the ground level that may not be captured by surveys and that may need other methods to be revealed.

Notes

- 1 The authors are thankful to the two anonymous reviewers who provided detailed comments and input for improvement. The paper was originally presented at *Lokniti*-CSDS, Delhi in April 2017 at a conference on “Explorations in Indian Democracy” with 2014 NES data. We would also like to acknowledge the comments received from Pradeep Chhibber, Irfan Nooruddin, Siddharth Swaminathan, and Sandeep Shastri since the inception of the paper, and the encouragement of Suhas Palshikar and K.C. Suri to expand our analysis to the NES 2019 data. Finally, we are indebted to Sanjay Kumar, Sumit Ganguly, and Surupa Gupta for providing us with the platform to publish this paper. The authors take full responsibility for the analysis and any unintentional errors that may have occurred in the paper.

- 2 We say this with the understanding that any electoral issue could either work for or against the incumbent government. We present a brief historical account of this in the first two sections.
- 3 We take Congress and the BJP for analysis in this paper because these parties have largely been in power over the last 70 years and have also been the anchors around which political alliances are formed. Further, the issues projected by these two parties largely capture the national sentiment.
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- 13 "Grievances, Not Issues to the Fore," *The Times of India*, February 15, 1967.
- 14 By focusing on several issues such as the nationalisation of banks, disinheriting the Princes, proposing ceilings on rural and urban property ownership, and publicly challenging big businesses, Congress sought to move the electorate toward issues and away from the politics of patronage; Myron Weiner, "The 1971 Elections and the Indian Party System," *Asian Survey* 11 (1971): 1156. On top of it, Mrs. Gandhi used *garibi hatao* (eradicate poverty) as one of her most important electoral slogans; Weiner, "The 1971 Elections and the Indian Party System," 1153-66.
- 15 Myron Weiner, "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India," *Asian Survey* 17 (1977): 619-26.
- 16 Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., "India in 1984: Confrontation, Assassination, and Succession," *Asian Survey* 25 (1984): 131-44.
- 17 B.M., "Diverting Attention from Policy Issues," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31 (1996): 318-19.
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- 19 Devesh Kapur, "India in 1999," *Asian Survey* 40 (2000): 195–207.
- 20 Nair and Eapen (2004).
- 21 In 1996, the question asked in the survey was "Talking about the elections just completed what do you think was the main issue around which the election was fought this time?" In 2004, the question asked was "For you, in this election which were the biggest/most important issues?" In 2014, the question was worded slightly differently from previous years: "What was the single most important issue for you while voting in this election?" Similarly, in 2019, the question asked "What was the most important issue for you while voting in this election?" This question was asked in a different manner in the surveys of 1998, 1999, and 2009.
- 22 Suri, K.C. (2009). *The Economy and Voting in the 15th Lok Sabha Elections*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.44, Issue 39.
- 23 The question asked was "Now I will ask you about some of the issues in the election. Please tell me if you have heard about these? (*If Yes*) For each one of them, please tell me how it affected your decision of whom to vote for – not very much, a lot or almost entirely?"
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- 25 Arvind Kejriwal said on February 14, 2015, "Before this, the taxes you paid were often stolen. I won't allow that to happen. Every paisa you pay will be spent on education, hospitals, roads, on improving your markets. We will build parking slots. We will spend on women's security; on streamlining water and power supply The government has enough money and resources. What is lacking is intent. If people with good intention are at the helm, there can be lots of development." Full text of speech: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/delhi-elections-2015/top-stories/Read-full-text-of-Arvind-Kejriwals-first-speech-as-Delhi-CM/article-show/46247444.cms>.
- 26 Andrew Wyatt, "Arvind Kejriwal's Leadership of the Aam Aadmi Party," *Contemporary South Asia* 23 (2015): 167–80.
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- 28 The authors would like to thank Prof. Sanjay Kumar, Director-CSDS and Co-Director Lokniti, for allowing access to the data for the paper. We would also like to thank Mr. Himanshu Bhattacharya for helping us sort the data according to the parliamentary constituency requirements of the sample.
- 29 Sanjay Kumar, "Caste-Based Mobilization a Reality In Indian Polls," *Deccan Chronicle*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/columnists/030918/caste-based-mobilisation-a-reality-in-indian-polls.html>.
- 30 In the 2009 election analysis of the NES data, Deshpande notes that "it is caste, class, age and education of voters that mainly decide the nature of Congress support at the macro level." Deshpande, "How did Women Vote in Lok Sabha Elections 2009?"
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 K.K. Kailash, "The More the Things Change, the More They Stay the Same in India: The *Bahujan* and the Paradox of the 'Democratic Upsurge,'" *Asian Survey* 52 (2012): 321–47.
- 33 Accessed on March 7, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/the-issues-that-mattered-in-an-issue-less-election/article27179964.ece>.

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- 35 Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, “Re-Nationalization of India’s Political Party System or Continued Prevalence of Regionalism and Ethnicity?” *Asian Survey* (2011): 1090–112.