

Nota Bene: Indian Voter Can Turn Any Analysis on its Head



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Last weekend, just before the first phase of voting in India's 16th general election opened, a group of people gathered in Delhi for a "nation-building" meeting. For two days they thrashed and turned in their search for a better alternative to the choices facing the nation. They were exercised by the epic corruption and misgovernance, by all the things going wrong around them. They wanted the citizen to return to the centre of things; they yearned for development with a moral and spiritual face. The next morning the Bharatiya Janata Party released its manifesto – and its preface held similar promises. But its very lateness in the campaign ensured the voter would not use it as a route map. Manifestos mean little now.

Our elections have been truly democratised. We have added 100 million voters since 2009. That number equals the number of Facebook users in India; 84 million of them access the social network on their mobile devices. So information and choices are now hugely dispersed, and young voters – just the 18- to 19-year-olds add up to 23 million – are savvier than the pundits can ever visualise. The choices they make will be profound.

This week I conducted a miniature and informal poll among about 50 students at two elite colleges. They had interesting things to say. The majority at a post-graduate management school said they would vote for the BJP. "They offer the best alternative among the lot. Secular or not, if they can take India onward and upward, I'll go with them," one first-time voter said. At a well-regarded law school, a first-timer said he would press the NOTA (none of the above) button. "I don't believe that our kind of democracy serves the interests of people like me. It's an outdated mechanism which is suitable only in societies where people are few," he said.

A third neophyte was far more explicit. "I concur with the views of Friedrich Nietzsche when I say that given a choice between two evils, we should choose the lesser evil. Democracy is all right on paper, but supremely unmanageable from a logistical standpoint. What I would suggest is a loosely divided confederation of our states with a high degree of decentralisation, which would handle all internal affairs independently, but would come together like a closed fist should there be any external trouble." Several young people said they would take the NOTA route but as the Election Commission has reminded us, even if the majority of voters in a constituency choose to opt

out, the winner is still the first past the post.

In reality, the Aam Aadmi Party is the NOTA of this election. It is contesting a large number of seats, and although one of the Delhi students saw it as "unreliable and flaky", Arvind Kejriwal is going to be a spoiler for Narendra Modi, not just in Varanasi. That is not going to slow the BJP juggernaut, by the looks of it.

This is the first election since 1984 where a national party is looking like a sure-fire winner, although even the BJP may still have to content itself with a coalition. Since a Bofors-scarred Rajiv Gandhi led Congress to a shaky 197 seats in 1989, we have had seven more general elections in the past quarter-century, and it is about time we had somebody less wobbly at the wheel.

The truth also is that Congress spent the past five years melting down, and Narendra Modi does not really need his *chhappan inch ki chhati* to bellow his way into power. He has had a long run-up: the kick-off was his 75-minute speech at the Shri Ram Collège of Commerce in Delhi in early February last year, and he has remained on message for fourteen months.

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The BJP is well stocked with good orators, and Congress voices sound more feeble by the day. That is not all. Between 1977 and 1989 Congress was nearly snuffed out in the east and the north; now it looks like it will also be erased from the

south and the west.

If you analyse voting patterns, the BJP lost the 2004 elections despite major gains in rural votes, but its urban, middle-class supporters stayed at home (total turnout was just about 58 per cent). In fact, the National Democratic Alliance won 36% of votes cast in 2004, and the United Progressive Alliance 35%, but the UPA still lucked out.

Neither the Congress nor the BJP has won even 30% of votes cast in this century, and the 48% that Congress won in 1957 seems a dream.

This time the BJP has got its arithmetic, and importantly, its social-media strategy right. Modi's Facebook fans total 12.5 million, including over 29,000 in Saudi Arabia. He has 3.7 million followers on Twitter (Shashi Tharoor of Congress, who was the only politician on Twitter in 2009, has 2.1 million followers), and his videos have been viewed over 15.5 million times on YouTube.

This is going to be an election driven more by the Internet and social media than all the stump speeches and television tantrums, and it is going to show in winning percentages.

NB: The Indian voter can turn any analysis on its head and serve up a surprise. NB means Nota Bene, "take careful note." Which you should.

(The writer is former Asia editor of Reuters)