

## ET The Needle's Eye

A look at how elections (and politics) are our biggest industry and employer

# Poll Point: Who are We Voting for Anyway?



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Several moons ago a car driver in Chennai told me the fascinating story of a young man whom he drove around in Coimbatore during the 2009 general elections. At every stop, the driver said, the young man would return with a bulging sack that he would stuff in to the boot. The young man was collecting cash for his father, a senior Tamil Nadu politician. This time the young man himself is standing for election. I do not know if the father is driving around in a car with a roomy boot.

The Election Commission said this week that it had seized ₹260 crore in illegal cash so far – with five rounds of voting still to go. The most cash seized was in Andhra Pradesh. Election officials have also seized drugs and liquor. Cash has been hidden in ambulances, liquor in milk tankers, and drugs in tea cups. The Election Commission is doing a heroic job of trying to enforce the spending limit – ₹70 lakh per candidate. But the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) estimates that about ₹30,000 crore will be spent on these elections, and that figure is likely to be far short of the truth. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) discovered that only four of the 6,753 candidates in the 2009 elections even admitted to spending more than the spending limit then – ₹40 lakh. Thirty more said they spent between 90 and 100% of the limit. Nineteen percent did not even bother to file election expenses.

When parties start spending money a year before elections are even announced, and when the two leading candidates jet around the country in a Bombardier owned by a Gujarati businessman or a Falcon owned by an Andhra businessman, not to speak of countless helicopter trips, and when a single candidate has assets in eleven digits, it is all funny money.

You will not be amused when you look at how elections (and politics) are our biggest industry and employer. Just a measure of inflation: we spent ₹1,300 crore on the 2004 election and ₹10.45 crore on the 1952 election. The number of polit-



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ical parties fighting elections is also rising in step with your food bill. A total of 215 parties contested in 2004, and 368 in 2009. The Election Commission listed 1,622 parties on March 10, 2014. By March 21 it had registered 24 more parties; and in the next five days, ten more. (A total of 53 parties fought the first elections in 1951). Even amoebae multiply slower.

Talking of germs, Mahesh Murthy of Pinstorm is a fervid supporter of the Aam Aadmi Party and is sure the AAP will win a sizeable number of seats in the 16th will be like a "reboot" of Parliament that gets rid of more viruses. Unlike the

## COST OF HOLDING POLLS

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BJP and the Congress, he says, AAP has not had to spend much at all on its digital marketing. "Its idea is compelling enough for any platform." Lok Sabha, each election from here on, he told me.

No wonder the upstart and chaotic AAP is fielding 434 candidates for this Lok Sabha. They are a motley bunch to be sure, but it is the first time in 67 years that a party is being driven more by idealism than personality.

Even idealism has a limit, and Pavitra, a young woman living in the sprawling Aya Nagar lower-income colony in Delhi, is a good example of the cynicism that hangs like a polluting cloud over us. Her father is a chauffeur, but she has

had a decent education and works for a television station. A week ago she voted for the third time in her life, and she was toying with the idea of pressing the None of The Above (NOTA) button.

"Nobody respects a person as a person," she told me. "If I had the money and opportunity I would leave India. If you have to give a 500-rupee bribe to avoid a *challan* if you cross the road, what's the point?" Pavitra voted for the Congress party the first time, but she has seen cash and liquor flowing into Aya Nagar with each election, and become wiser. "Corruption is within ourselves," she said in an emotionless voice.

By the way, the AAP website is the most transparent when it comes to candidates. Congress is not too far behind, with its 440 candidates. The BJP is already behaving with the imperious opaqueness of power. Its website has no single list of candidates and the party is dribbling bits like "9th list of Andhra Pradesh candidates".

Another CMS study says Arvind Kejriwal got more TV airtime than Narendra Modi; Rahul Gandhi was a distant third during a two-week period in March. But the main focus of coverage was interesting: personalities, followed by Hindutva, party, and development. Corruption came fifth. Matters of import cannot sully the greatest show on earth Last Saturday was replete with horses' mouths. Both the BJP's killer giant and the Congress party's dolorous dauphin were grilled or lightly turned over on television, as was the prime minister's former media adviser. (This PM has had three media advisers, and none of them seems to have had any performance targets on the job). It is very likely that you are one of the people who will voted on Wednesday, when 121 Lok Sabha constituencies go to the polls in the single biggest chunk so far of this election. More than 192 million adults are eligible to vote.

Just think about it – as many Indians are registered to vote on one day as there are Brazilians. And this is just one of nine phases in this election.

The best thing that human ingenuity came up with for India was democracy. It is our top spectator sport, and it rivets millions of us to our television screens and pulls millions more into dusty fields across the nation to gawk and strain and cheer. We are on a roll.