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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast
“A primer on India’s general elections”
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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I am Fred Dews.

India has started its multiphase weeks-long general elections that will determine the composition of the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament, and also the next prime minister. Results will be announced May 23.

To make sense of the world's largest exercise of democracy, today's episode features a discussion led by Brookings Fellow Tanvi Madan, director of the India Project, and three scholars, one each from the American Enterprise Institute, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Brookings India.

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And one more announcement, since early in the Donald Trump Presidency, our 5 on 45 podcast has offered expert commentary and analysis about policies of the Administration. Starting soon we are going to shift the focus and the name of 5 on 45. In The Current you will get analysis and explanation from Brookings scholars about breaking news and policy changes as they develop across a range of domestic and international issues. You will learn more about what happened, why it's important, and what to expect.

If you subscribe to and have enjoyed 5 on 45, you don't need to do anything to get The Current.

And now, here's Tanvi Madan with a panel of experts on India's general elections.

MADAN: I'm Tanvi Madan, director of the India Project at the Brookings Institution, as well as a Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program. We are here today to talk about the upcoming Indian election, which will take place over a few weeks, with results coming out on May 23. Today we have a great panel to talk to us about what might happen, or what we have to look forward to over the next few weeks, but also what we might expect in terms of results and scenarios.

Sadanand?

DHUME: Sadanand Dhume, I am with the American Enterprise Institute and I write a column for the *Wall Street Journal*.

VAISHNAV: I'm Milan Vaishnav. I am a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

JAISHANKAR: I'm Dhurva Jaishankar. I'm a fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings India in New Delhi.

MADAN: In 2014 we had a bit of a surprise in the last Indian election. It was a surprise not that now-Prime Minister Modi's BJP, or Bharatiya Janata Party, won the election—they were expected to come through—the surprise was that after 25 years India had a majority government. This time around, the BJP and Prime Minister Modi are going to try to get re-elected.

Milan, set the stage for us. They are trying to get reelected. Who is opposing them and what can we expect in terms of the major political parties that are in the fray?

VAISHNAV: Yeah. So, the BJP won the first single party majority in three decades in 2014. It was something that many election analysts thought was impossible. For 25 years we had had a series of coalition governments and Narendra Modi, under his leadership, led the BJP to an outright majority in 2014. And conversely, the Congress Party, which has been the dominant political formation throughout India's post-independence history, sank to a lowly 44 seats out of a parliament of 543. This was by far its lowest tally ever.

In the past five years, the BJP has risen to new heights. It controlled just 5 states of India's 29 states in 2014, and it reached a peak a few months ago of 20. It now controls 17 states. And the Congress Party has found it very hard to find their footing. They struggle with two primary issues, one of leadership, that they have no leader who can go toe to toe with Mr. Modi, who has the same kind of charisma, leadership, executive experience. And I think they struggle also with ideas. They don't quite know how to put together a forward-looking aspirational vision, much like Modi did in 2014.

The Congress of late has experienced something of a resurgence. In December 2018 they snatched back three critical states which the BJP had controlled, which gives them some momentum. But this election season is going to be not just about these two big parties, but really about a whole spate of regional political parties. I mean we tend to forget that at an Indian general election one out of every two voters votes for a party other than the Congress or the BJP. And so, we have alliances being formed on both sides, some siding with the BJP, some siding with the Congress, and then a whole range of parties who prefer to stay unaligned and wait to see, you know, how the cookie crumbles. And then perhaps that party can be the kind maker post-election.

So, I would say the Congress is coming into this election with the hopes of creating opportunistic state by state alliances to oppose the BJP. It has been a little bit slow off the market doing so. And the one state that I'd point to is Uttar Pradesh, where there are two other big regional political parties who are opposing the BJP. The Congress doesn't find itself in that opposition alliance. And so, therefore, there's a real threat that amidst this fragmentation of the opposition, the BJP could come back to power this time around.

MADAN: Sadanand, you were just in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state. And one of the reasons that the BJP won that single party majority the last time around was that they had almost swept that state in terms of the general election, but they also then subsequently won the state elections there.

What is the general mood, not just there about the BJP, but is there a sense that either the Congress Party or this coalition of different parties, particularly two parties—the BSP and the SP—tell us a little bit about these parties, but also kind of tell us kind of what you think of the sense of the mood, or the term that is often used in Indian politics, the howa, this kind of intangible political wind, so to speak. Which way is it blowing in Uttar Pradesh and what that might mean for kind of the broader outcome of the election?

DHUME: Well, thanks, Tanvi.

First the big picture. Out of the 282 seats that the BJP won in 2014, 71—73 if you count an ally—so a fourth of their seats came from this one state, Uttar Pradesh. So, it's hard to exaggerate the significance of Uttar Pradesh to whoever forms the next government, but particularly to the BJP.

I did not travel across the state, but I did travel in the western part of the state, and over there I was struck by the continuing very high levels of popularity of Modi and the BJP. It's not as though you don't hear people complaining about problems, but I think that one of the things that the BJP has communicated very effectively is the idea that Modi is a self-made selfless leader who is toiling ceaselessly for the nation, is incorruptible, is a strong leader who has enhanced India's status on the world stage, and knows how to get tough with Pakistan when Pakistan needs to be gotten tough with.

So, the thing that I heard over and over again in that part of UP, but also in, you know, speaking with migrants from other parts of the Hindi heartland in Delhi, was just this idea that Modi is a good man. And people don't necessarily get into policy the way we do over here, and you can't have conversations on some of his more controversial policy moves, but the overwhelming advantage that he has to my mind comes down to the fact that as a brand he is still for the overwhelming number majority, at least of Hindu, Hindi speaking voters, strikes me as a brand that is overwhelming positive.

MADAN: Dhruva, something that Sadanand mentioned was Modi's stance. And there has been a lot in the campaign kind of one kind of strength, resolve, respect on the world stage that Modi has helped kind of India acquire.

This time around some have called this a national security election. And Sadanand mentioned particularly kind of Pakistan and with the Indian Air Force strike after the recent terrorist attack in Kashmir. How do you think this is playing out? Is this a national security election? Because there is a pretty mixed record about kind of Indian voters frankly caring about these things beyond a certain point.

So, what is your sense of do foreign and security policy issues really play in any election, and particularly in this one?

JAISHANKAR: So, I think generally national security and foreign policy has not had a major role in Indian electoral outcomes, whether it is in the 1970s, in the 1990s, and after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008 there was a general election a year later in which it didn't seem to have much of an impact. At least there's not a strong core relation.

That seems to have changed a little bit, but, again, hard to say how much. And we already saw this a little bit in some of the state elections that took place over the last five years. I recall in Maharashtra, which had a state election in 2015 or so, shortly after Modi was elected, on the campaign trail they would show visuals of Modi speaking at Madison Square Garden in New York to a packed house to thousands of people overseas. And this was just the visual of a prime minister going abroad, and the fact that it was being used in domestic political campaigns was a little bit of a departure from what we've seen in the past.

I think we would have assumed that national security and foreign policy would have played a very minimal role in this election as well. And you can see that to some degree in the manifestos of the two major parties, which don't pay a lot of attention, don't seem to have invested a lot in innovative ideas in the foreign policy and national security space.

However, something happened, which was a major terrorist attack at Pulwama on February 14 of this year. And this was an attack that caused the largest number of casualties in Jammu and Kashmir for many years. It happened just, you know, a couple

of months before the election, and a Pakistan based terrorist group, Jaish-e-Mohammed, took responsibility for it. So suddenly Pakistan was inserted into the election rhetoric, and this was followed a couple of weeks later by Indian air strikes against a terrorist training facility in Pakistan, as well as the day after that combat between Indian and Pakistani aircraft, which led to the downing of an Indian plane and the capture of the pilot, who was subsequently released.

So suddenly national security has been thrust into the forefront. The polls do seem to indicate that this have given Modi a little bit of a bump, but how much of a bump I think remains to be seen.

MADAN: Sadanand, one of the things—I mean I have always found this idea of the fact that it's still called a manifesto is quite kind of a throwback, that they just don't call it a policy platform or a policy program. One of the things, if you look at particularly the manifestos of the BJP and the Congress Party, the two largest parties, is that, as Dhruva mentioned, the kind of pages on foreign and security policy is quite slim on that. But the bulk of these manifestos are about a range of other issues, bread and butter issues, domestic policy.

Could you give us a sense of what those key issues are as voters go to the polls, beyond kind of beyond this foreign and security, this portraying strength and respect on the international stage? What are these issues and had this been an issue or a campaign where this kind of balakot, as they're calling it, this Indian Air Force strike, if this hadn't dominated, what would we have been talking about and what might voters actually be voting on?

DHUME: So, I would say broadly, if you look at the economic issues, I would say

that both the major parties, both the BJP and the Congress, are peddling broadly populist welfarist messages. Now, it's harder to take away any one single thing from the BJP's platform. I'd say that, you know, it's a blend of issues, you know, broadly pointing towards national strength, national greatness of all-around economic development. And in the manner these things are crafted, they really are—it's a question of people disaggregate and look for groups and they say, here, middle class, here's something for you, women, here, you can have this. And so, there isn't sort of a—to the extent that there's a coherent philosophy running through any of this, it's basically populism.

The Congress Party is more interesting to the extent that there is one very clear identifiable future, and this is the minimum income guarantee, where they have essentially promised about $1,000 a year to 50 million families, or 250 million people, which they say constitutes the bottom 20 percent of the population. Now, if you're Congress, you really want this idea. They call it NYAY, which is a kind of tortured acronym, but it stands finally for justice. And so if you are Congress you want NYAY, or justice, or this idea to take hold and you want these voters who may not be the most vocal voters, not the sort of people who are on Twitter, not the sort of people who are setting the tone on WhatsApp, but are nonetheless voting, and you want them to be enamored of this idea that Congress is the party that really cares for the poor and the BJP is all about this razzmatazz. And they are hoping that that takes hold. It remains to be seen, but that seems to be their bet.

On the BJP side it is much more a question of the job has been begun well, give us five more years to do more.

MADAN: Milan, comment on that as well. I mean we've seen this kind of sense of

the Congress essentially saying, look, Modi hasn't delivered. Actually, there are no good days, which is what he promised in the last election, and particularly on the kind of economic performance side. And the BJP is saying listen, these guys had 65 years, they didn't deliver enough, I've only had five, give me more. So, don't compare, don't judge me on my five years, but essentially judge me compared to the previous governments.

Are there other issues that you would highlight? What is their track record, the BJP's track record, on which they're going to the public? And do you think it's enough to actually get them over the finish line? I think you've said something like the national security issue gives voters almost a permission slip to overlook some of these things. But are there successes that they can point to, or is this largely kind of not a great track record on particularly economic performance?

VAISHNAV: So I think, you know, as Sadanand mentioned, this party came into power on the backs of pretty lofty promises about what they were going to do in terms of creating millions of jobs, reviving what had been, and still is in some ways, a more abundant investment cycle, getting growth to potentially sort of double digits, and we really haven't seen large parts of that narrative materialize. There have been some successes in terms of shrinking the deficit, in terms of taming inflation, but the economy is still I would say on shaky ground.

And so, therefore, what national security allows Modi to do is pivot to an issue that people identify him with because it links him to the traits that he touts, of leadership, of decision making, of nationalism, of muscularity. And I think the BJP, much like the Republican Party in the United States, is the party which is seen as more hawkish on

national security.

What's really interesting about the pivot is not just towards national security, but toward social welfare, as Sadanand mentioned. The BJP came to power mocking the Congress emphasis on social welfare for the 10 years that it was in power, from '04 to '14, saying that we are going to come and take down a lot of these initiatives and focus on empowerment not entitlement. And I think they realized, number one, there was a danger of being labeled anti poor and too pro-business, and the second is a more of a Machiavellian sort of streak, I think, of trying to saturate the policy space on the center left, such that the Congress has no way to maneuver. So, if you look at the Congress counters to what the BJP is doing, it's well we're going to do more of it and better, right. But they really can't criticize what the BJP has done because frankly the BJP has just doubled down on a lot of the programs and schemes that the Congress first put into place.

MADAN: Sadanand?

DHUME: I would add that a large part of this—and it's about political communication—and a large part of this from the BJP's perspective seems to have been to concretize the economic debate in the country. And so instead of getting into the kind of conversation we may have about GDP growth rates or fiscal deficits of investment numbers or even inflation, they've turned this into, look, Modi helped poor people open this many of hundreds of millions of bank accounts, or, look, we gave out this many loans to small businesses, or, look, we built this many toilets, or we gave this many people home loans. It's all very concrete and tangible. And to a large extent I think that message is getting through.

Now, you can speak with people and not everybody has necessarily benefitted from every program, but the awareness that these programs exist seems to have really sort of entered the larger consciousness. And I think that they are counting on that being much more effective in terms of political messaging than the kinds of conversations that we have had about the economy in the past.

MADAN: Dhruva, this kind of debate, this emphasis on social welfare programs, populism has had an impact on foreign policy, particularly foreign economic policy, trade, and investment issues. One of the lessons that the BJP seemed to have internalized from its inability to get reelected in 2004 was that they had focused too much on economic reform, on liberalization, on what their tagline was, India Shining. And they had made a lot of people abroad happy, but then at home people were not kind of happy with the outcome.

So, can you tell us about like how you think this already might have impacted some of that foreign economic policy? And do you think that we will see a switch in the aftermath of the elections?

JAISHANKAR: There is a lot there. I look at three different elements of foreign economic policy, and I think the record is mixed in each of these, and one case actually less mixed.

The first I think is on trade policy broadly where we have really seen—while we've seen the restart of some trade negotiations, we've seen no trade deals concluded since 2012. So, the Modi government basically did not conclude a single trade agreement of significance. And there has been concern about growing trade protectionism in a number of specific fields. Some of this has actually been cited by

Donald Trump himself and some of Donald Trump's advisors. It's playing out in areas like new technology spheres, like eCommerce policies and so forth.

So, I think there has been some concern about growing trade protectionism, partly to protect small businesses, which seem to be noncompetitive in the event of greater market liberalization. But that I think has been a feature, particularly of the last few years, that may or may not change depending on the electoral outcome.

I think a second area which a bit is more mixed has been in terms of sourcing foreign investment and technology. So, the FDI, foreign direct investment, flows have increased, although last couple of years stabilized after that, there has been a big push to improve India's ease of doing business rankings, making it appear to be a more attractive investment destination. But there, too, I think the record is a bit more mixed than had been expected.

I think the final area, which in some ways the most nebulous but also the most complicated, has been in terms of translating some of that openness and some of that opportunity, particularly as China's economy slows down, into actual concrete changes.

So, just got give an example on the technology sphere, in theory India has access to some of the highest levels of defense technology than not just the United States, but Russia, France, Israel have to offer. And arguably few other countries in the world are as well positioned in terms of theoretical access to these technologies. How much of it is actually translated into technological transfer so India? It's been minimal, only at the lower ranges. And that has to do a lot with domestic policy in fact rather than the foreign policy element of it.

So, I think, again, the record has been mixed, but we are seeing these trends

take place, in part compelled by pressures at home.

MADAN: And you haven't seen any party really make the case, or any of the major parties make the case, that a more open and liberal economy has actually helped bring more people out of poverty or create more jobs than India before it liberalized.

But all these are kind of issues essentially, kind of the key issues, but this election, part of what we're watching is it comes down to are you going to vote on these issues or what the BJP has essentially said, you may have all these kind of issues, we have Modi and trust Modi, put your trust in Modi. So, in some ways it's kind of a personality versus issues argument.

What will you be thinking of when you go into that election booth? And just in case our viewers don't know, all voting in India is electronic. There are no paper votes or hanging chads.

Milan, do you agree this is about Modi versus his performance on some of these issues? And talk us through what are the most likely scenarios? Is Modi likely to win, is he likely to lead his coalition to power? Or can a set of opposition parties come together, and what is the likelihood that they will and that they will form the next government?

VAISHNAV: So, in 2014 Modi very successfully presidentialized a parliamentary election to the extent we have not seen probably since Indira Gandhi in 1971. Traditionally we have thought of Indian elections as an aggregate of state level verdicts that sum up to some sort of national tally. And at least in the western and northern and central parts of the country, what we often term "the Hindi Belt", there was this kind of a quasi-presidential election, less so in parts of the south and the east where the BJP and frankly the Congress, for that matter, are sort of bit players.

So, I think it's in the BJP's advantage to try and recreate that presidential system in 2019 simply because the other side has no match. And we've already seen Mr. Modi on the campaign trail tease the opposition, saying we're very transparent, we're telling you who our leader is going to be. The other side won't tell you. On Monday they'll say it's Rahul Gandhi, on Tuesday they'll say it's Mayawati, on Wednesday they'll say it's Mamata Banerjee.

MADAN: Tell us who these people are.

VAISHNAV: So Mayawati is one of the major opposition figures who is leading, or co-leading, the opposition alliance in Uttar Pradesh. Mamata Banerjee is the very strong chief minister in the state of West Bengal, which traditionally the BJP has not been a player in, but now they have emerged as arguably the most important opposition in the state.

MADAN: And both strong female leaders?

VAISHNAV: Both strong female leaders. And so, the opposition would like to decentralize this and make it a state by state election. My guess is that we're going to land somewhere in the middle because quite frankly the organizational and financial and charismatic advantage the BJP have are going to be hard to completely dismiss.

So, I still maintain that I think the most likely election scenario is that the BJP comes down significantly from where it was in 2014, when it had 282 seats, and gets something like 210 or 220 seats.

MADAN: Tell us how many a party needs or a coalition needs to—

VAISHNAV: So, 272 is the magic number. That's what you need to get an outright majority. They are unlikely to do that on their own, and may not even be able to

do that with their existing allies, but at 210 or 220 they would comfortably form the government with the help of one or two new alliance partners, and those new alliance partners have already made clear that they would be willing to strike some kind of deal.

I would say that the second scenario is the BJP almost replicates what it did last time, maybe not quite an outright majority, but close, in which case it would easily form the government with its existing NDA, national democratic alliance, allies. I would say the probability of that scenario would seem very unlikely, you know, just a few months—has probably increased to I would say maybe 20 or 25 percent.

The outlier scenario is the BJP severely underperforms where it was in 2014 and gets about 180 seats. That would be 100 less fewer than it had last time. And here I think one of two things could happen. It is conceivable the BJP could form the government, but it would require so much help from new partners that those new partners would probably demand that Modi step aside and you get a more pliable or transactional prime minister. And this is where names like Rajnath Singh, who is the Home Minister, and Nitin Godkari, who is an old time BJP hand and cabinet minister, get mentioned.

I still find it very unlikely that Modi and party president, Amit Shah, having completely centralized all power within their hands and remade their party in their mold, are going to let somebody else come and take it away from them. More likely I think is that the party could sit in opposition and let the Congress and regional fronts come together to form a coalition government in the hopes that it would sort of collapse under the weight of its own contradictions and then the BJP could kind of swoop in as the savior.

So, I don't think we're likely to get to that outcome. I think the first scenario where we see kind of weakened Modi and a weakened BJP come back, is probably the most likely outcome where we are today.

MADAN: Sadanand, we've talked a lot about Modi, but we have heard some other names being mentioned. One of the great things about this great Indian festival of elections is that there are a lot of very interesting larger than life personalities.

Tell us a little bit about some of the people that Milan mentioned, but also kind of Rahul Gandhi, who is the sign of the dynasty that is governed India for most of its history, but also his sister, who has now entered politics in kind of a more formal way.

And then, Dhruva, I'm going to ask you about some of the other kind of interesting leaders across the country, if there is anybody you're looking at, particularly any the female leaders you think we should be watching out for.

Sadanand?

DHUME: I would say Rahul Gandhi is India's leading smaller than life politician. This is someone who was “to the manor born.” He is the son, grandson, and great-grandson of prime ministers; he has been waiting in the wings for about 15 years now. You know, he has been re-launched more times than any brand of shampoo I can think of, and he somehow never manages to take off. Most recently he's been sort of on some kind of comeback for the past year and a half.

My sense of this—you know, if you haven't guessed, I'm a skeptic—my sense of this is that he suffers from a couple of really big deficiencies. The first is that over time—we can argue about whether this is justifiable or not—but over time he has been turned into a bit of a WhatsApp joke by the BJP's machine. You say his name and people start

giggling—Dan Quayle syndrome. And that's never a good sign for any politician. So that's something that haunts him. I think it haunts him less among English speaking educated elites than it did a couple of year ago, but it still haunts him.

The second problem he has is that he has an unerring instinct for picking the worst advisors. And this is someone who to my mind just does not have an instinct for surrounding himself with people who understand the zeitgeist of the country.

Coming back to a point Milan made about the lack of freshness of ideas, I mean you would think that at a moment like this where it sorts of seems pretty clear to just about anybody that India is going through a phase of rising nationalism. Even before this, even if you ignore the suicide car bombing in Kashmir, it's pretty clear that many Indians, particularly young Indians, see themselves as part of this country that is a rising power and they sort of want to sort of feel pride in it and so on. And the inability, the complete sort of tone deafness and the inability of Congress to really tap into that, despite the fact that Rahul Gandhi is 20 years younger than Narendra Modi, is quite striking to me. So, there is Rahul Gandhi.

The third point I'd add, since I can't stop talking about all his deficiencies, is that in many ways he sort of still projects the air of a part-time politician. So, for example, just this year in January he suddenly vanished for several days and nobody knew where he was. I mean there are 100 days left for a national election and no one knows where the guy is. Turns out he had come to the U.S. for a few days. And it's this sort of "part-time-ness" that he projects that, you know, makes it difficult for many people to take him seriously.

His sister, who is a year younger, Priyanka Gandhi, is at least—if you speak with

Congress people, they say that she is the natural politician in the family. I just read a very interesting magazine profile of this journalist who essentially followed her around on a boat ride down the Ganges. And this reporter spent a lot of time looking at just at just sort of her retail campaign skills. So, like if someone gives her a glass of sharbat, she drinks it, she kind of stops and kisses the babies. So, she seems to have a set of basic political skills, both in terms of communication and in terms of outreach that her brother lacks.

We don't yet know how this is going to translate into the elections. I think it's probably too little too late for this election, but it will be very interesting to see if in the long-term Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is able to translate what seems to be a much more developed sense of retail political skills than her brother into leadership. When you talk with people in the Congress privately the almost unanimously say that of the two siblings, she is the most natural politician.

MADAN: And of course, people point out that she has a resemblance to her grandmother, Indira Gandhi, who was also prime minister of India.

Dhruva, Sadanand mentioned rising nationalism. Is there rising nationalism in India, particularly among young voters? And going back to that question of personalities—and the reason I asked about female leaders is we have a colleague, Shamika Ravi, doing some really interesting work at the Brookings India Center on women and politics, voters as well as leaders, and we've seen there was larger turnout across the board last time. So, in 2014 there was record turnout across the board in India, 66 percent of voters turned out, but there was also closing of the gap between male and female voters, and in some states, there was more turnout of female voters

than men turning out.

So, tell us a little bit about kind of this aspect of is there rising nationalism, particularly among young voters? There will be 130 million—Milan, correct me if I'm wrong—130 million young voters in this election—that is between 18 and 23 who never voted before. And also, this aspect of are there these kinds of major female leaders that you are looking out for that might be interesting?

JAISHANKAR: You know, there does appear to be a rising nationalism, depending on how you define it, and you can see this in a few ways. One is simply the media and the popularity of media, both traditional and social media. So, for example, when a particularly nationalist TV news anchor launched his own news channel a couple of years ago—

MADAN: It's almost a party.

MR. JAISHANKAR: It's almost a party, yeah. I think to the surprise of many people it became its viewership has significantly surpassed those of many of the traditional English language television news channels. And this caters to what he produces seems to cater to a very nationalist audience, a nationalist base. You see this in social media.

Public opinion surveys also seem to indicate a little bit of that. So, a lot of surveys indicate that Indians, pretty young Indians, want to see India as a major power or believe that India is a major power and is seeking its rightful place in the world. Rather paradoxically—and this actually is mirrored in U.S. public opinion surveys—is that when they're asked what India should do about it, you know, would you like to see more military intervention, they have been more tepid about what that, you know, the

burdens.

MADAN: We're glad about them not being tepid about military intervention, don't you think so? Or at least India's neighbors are glad.

JAISHANKAR: So, the costs associated with leadership, they have been poor. But they do want the respect and I think that that is indicated.

In terms of the elections, you know, I think there are a number of colorful personalities. We've spoken about a few. I would actually quickly highlight four groups. One is prominent female politicians, not just for the two major parties, and both would be fielding a large number of female candidates. But, you know, Mamata Banerjee, who Milan already mentioned, who is the Chief Minister of West Bengal, kind of singlehandedly campaigned against the Communist Party in West Bengal, which had ruled for many years, and very successfully campaigned against them and rose to power.

MADAN: And has no family links that she—on the back of which she came to—

JAISHANKAR: And another politician like that, Mayawati, who is a Dalit leader belonging to lowest social strata in India, but who has carved out a powerful position for herself in Uttar Pradesh. Mehbooba Mufti I would mention is another one. I mean she does come from a political family, but she is—until recently was the chief minister and governor of Jammu and Kashmir. While it doesn't have a lot of electoral votes or electoral seats, obviously Jammu and Kashmir carry a great deal of importance, particularly given the terrorist attack there recently.

A second category of interesting personalities are a bunch of regional leaders, and particularly in the south. We'll see some rather powerful regional parties coming up,

whether it is in Telangana or Andhra Pradesh. The future of some of these parties will be in question. The BJD, which is the party in Odisha, is facing again another onslaught of the BJP, which is reshaping in some ways the political map there.

A third category of interesting people to observe is new millennials, in some ways a post liberalization. These are 20-something Indians, Hardik Patel, Kanhaiya Kumar, people like that. These are people who often rose on the back of popular charismatic either student protests or public protests. And how they manage this transition into mainstream politics will be interesting to see. Some of them are actually standing for election for the first time.

And, finally, I would also mention some of the regional leaders, in the Congress particularly, who have seen a bit of resurgence with Congress doing well in the last local elections. So, Ashok Gehlot, these are chief ministers of large states who are close to Rahul Gandhi. And how they fare and how they are portrayed in the coming weeks will be interesting to see.

MS. MADAN: Milan, Dhruva mentioned or alluded to some key voting groups, he talked about the Dalits, but also, he talked about women.

Talk to us about which of the voting groups you'll be watching. We've seen parties—Sadanand had mentioned, you know, kind of there's almost something for everybody thrown out there, but here we call it micro targeting. Talk to us about which of the voting groups, as such, that you're watching, and do they really vote as groups.

VAISHNAV: I would say there's three groups, and we've kind of danced around this.

I think the first is these young voters, the 130 million first time voters, people

between the ages of 18 and 23 who have never voted in the general election. What is interesting about this group is that prior to 2014 they have turned out to vote at much lower rates than the general population. In 2014 they voted at higher rates than the average and they broke decisively for the BJP. And it's one of the great ironies that Sadanand mentioned that here is Narendra Modi, who is much older than Rahul Gandhi, who is able to connect with young voters much better than Rahul is, in part because of the sorts of the themes that he talked about in 2014.

Now, where are these youngsters today? On the one hand you could argue they look out and see a continuing lack of jobs, economic distress, rural disquiet, and may be turned off. On the other hand, there is the TINA factor, that there is no alternative, in thinking that Modi is perhaps the best guy for the job and we should give him five more years.

The second group are women. We have seen a really remarkable development in India over the past 10 years where we are almost reaching gender parity when it comes to voter turnout between men and women. This is something that has never happened before. Women have traditionally lagged behind men when it comes to coming out to vote on election day by 6-8 percentage points. And so, we're seeing how in state elections, and as you mentioned in half of the states in last national election, women coming out to vote in greater numbers.

The reason this gets a lot of attention is because these are newly mobilized actors. Political parties believe that they're up for grabs, that they're sort of swing voters who don't have deep political or ideological or partisan attachments. And so, when you look at the major campaigns in the BJP and the Congress, a lot of the schemes and

campaign promises they are talking about are packaged up in a very pro women rhetoric. So, whether it's cleaning up of cooking gas subsidies, which is something the BJP has done, opening bank accounts—you know, the Congress Party is saying if we come to power and implement this new minimum income support scheme, that will go to the woman of the house, to her bank account.

What we don't know really is do women want any of these things? So, we even still talk about women in a very patriarchal way, saying oh, here are things that will make her more efficient in the kitchen when she cooks. But the point is that the parties are reaching out to them and I think that's an interesting sign.

The third group are Dalits, the former untouchables, India's—the sort of lowest rung on the caste hierarchy. Over a period of 10 or 15 years Dalits have become strong votaries of the BJP. And Narendra Modi was really able to capitalize on that in 2014. During the past five years there have been a number of incidents, anti-Dalit violence, a gap between promises of representing Dalits and a lack of adequate political representation and bureaucratic representation that has fed a sense among some Dalit quarters of resentment or disaffection with the BJP.

Now, this would be a really big deal if they were to vote for the opposition and that would be a considerable vote bank, as we call them, that the BJP would be deprived of. What we don't know is whether national security, and the issues that Dhruva was talking about, somewhat neutralize this because the BJP has been exploiting this issue to the hilt, saying it's too dangerous right now to change horses in midstream. India's poorest are going to be worse off if you have a mess, fragmented, kind of rudderless government that comes in after us.

MADAN: Sadanand, I think you want to respond to that, but also, I mean one of the things you've written about in terms of how you describe these elections—we've heard many descriptions, that this is going to be the Modi versus everybody else, or personality versus issues. One of the things you wrote in the summer last year, and a number of people have picked up on that, which is this is a kind of—if 2014 was the hope election, this is the fear election. And I think that's to that point of kind of (inaudible), that if you don't vote for Modi India will not be secure or guarded.

There is also another aspect. It has not just been Dalit. We have seen other kind of identity politics, religious kind of identity politics.

So, respond to Milan, but also talk to us about whether this aspect of Hindu nationalism in particular has been something that has come up in this election.

DHUME: And I think actually both those points are related. One way of looking at this is you have this broad theme that has been running through Indian politics at least since the late 1980s when (inaudible) re-launched the BJP. And on the BJP's part, there is an attempt to consolidate the 80 percent of Indian voters who identify at some level as Hindus. And if you saw how they did it in 2014 you would see that across the board, regardless of demographic, regardless of wealth, all groups that were identified as Hindus, whether they were upper caste, or the so called other backward classes, or the Dalits, a plurality of voters went for the BJP. So, they beat the Congress amongst all of those sections.

The opposition would like caste to play a larger role and they want to splinter that 80 percent. So that's one dynamic that's sort of running through this.

And then the other of course is that there's another 20 percent of Indians who are

not Hindu, primarily Muslims, but also Christians. And, you know, my sense here is that the BJP hopes to get some of these votes simply merely by pointing out that some of the welfare programs, whether it's the bank accounts or it's the gas connections or the toilets or the home loans, have gone to people of all communities and that these people should—that Christians and Muslims should also therefore turn around and vote for the BJP. My own sense of this is that this is not very likely because what you have seen is a sharpening of some of the exclusivist internationalist rhetoric. If not from the prime minister, certainly from other senior figures within his party.

And so, to that extent I think that identity politics is more heightened this time around compared to last time around. And one of the things that we don't really talk about so much, and partly because some of us—because we're so firmly rooted in the secular world, we may not have the vocabulary to speak about it—is this almost, you know, quasi mystical appeal that Modi has among a certain section of voters. I was just watching a YouTube video the other day of a group of people singing this—you could call it—I don't know whether you'd call it a bhajan or some other kind of devotional song—

MADAN: Which is a devotional song.

DHUME:—all about how Modi was coming back and this was this sort of great moment. And they were like playing the drums and they were in this sort of almost like trance like state. And I think that's stuff like, you know, we don't talk about so much because it's out of our world. That is something real

In terms of the question of fear, I think it does come down to how you view some of these questions of identity politics. If you believe that the Hindu nationalist movement

is fundamentally at odds with Indian pluralism, and certainly among the commentariat that is a fairly widespread fear, then you really have reason to worry about five more years for Modi, because this is somebody who is seen as effectively shredding the social compact between the majority Hindu community and minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, but especially Muslims.

My last piece for the *Times of India* I pointed out how over the past five years, you know, if we had an ease of doing bigotry index, India climbed remarkably up the rankings. I don't mean that's a good thing. And this is really something that many people in the majority community are sort of blind to because it just doesn't affect them, but it's very hard to come to meet with Muslims or Christians who are not concerned.

So that's one set of fears. What does five more years of this figure who clearly doesn't care about these issues or doesn't care about them enough, what does that mean for the social compact in India?

The fears on the other set, from a BJP voter's perspective, is that if you let the Congress back in you're basically opening the door to corruption, lassitude, lack of merit, the idea that this country of 1.3 billion people is not really being democratic, it's just in hock to a single family and it doesn't matter how mediocre the leadership of that family is, you're just supposed to sort of continually elect them and treat them as effectively a royal family.

And then both sides you see a shrinking of space, partly due to social media, as you see in other countries, and there is a very black and white view I think of what this means. And both sides are extremely fearful of what a victory by the other would mean.

MADAN: Milan?

VAISHNAV: You know, I would just say I think Sadanand is right, that there is this in some sense—you know, many people have said one of the things that is at stake is what kind of India that India will be in the future. Will it be a country for the majority Hindu population, will it be a secular republic.

Two things. One is that secularism really isn't on the menu this time. No one is talking about that because it has been successfully branded as minority appeasement. And so even the Congress, which used to champion the cause of democratic secularism, is talking about how you reclaim Hinduism from Hindutva. In other words, how you create separation between Hinduism, which is an inclusive, plural, open religion, from kind of the fringes of Hindu nationalism.

And so, we don't know if that's a short-term tactical move or this actually has long-term ramifications for where the country might go. But I would submit that the BJP is also not talking so much about Hindu nationalism during this election. Of course, there are undercurrents, they're dog whistling. I mean dog whistling isn't even an apt term. There is just out right whistling. But they have pivoted to talking about nationalism more generally. The commitment to India's sovereignty, and what they call sacred geography, a call to patriotic loyalty and commitment to the nation, quashing certain forms—or curbing certain forms of dissent that call into question government or government leaders. And I think the worry over here is once you get in the business of issuing certificates on who is a good national and who is an anti-national, it is just a short pivot from there to say well, what makes a good national is a good Hindu. But it's less abrasive and less of a turnoff when you're talking about nationalism in these general terms because it is somewhat devoid on the surface of this religious content.

MADAN: Dhruva, Sadanand mentioned social media has made things more polarized, more divisive. Others would argue it has actually made the situation more democratic. That now even the Congress Party—which Rahul Gandhi didn't even have a Twitter account until recently—that they have actually kind up their game, that whether it's YouTube or kind of WhatsApp, which is very big in India and owned by Facebook, or even Twitter, the—

JAISHANKAR: Tik Tok.

MADAN: Tik Tok, which most people don't know about here, which is this Chinese kind of video app. But these things are—

JAISHANKAR: Are you on Tik Tok, Tanvi?

MADAN: No, I am not on Tik Tok. I don't even have an Insta, as my nieces tell me it should be called, not even Instagram. But these things have actually made this more democratic and more responsive to particularly younger voters. You've actually looked at kind of social media information distribution and technology as well in the past across a variety of democracies, but how do you see this playing out, how are these tools being used? We talked a lot about fake news in the U.S. context, but is this a problem there? And the reason I think a lot of companies here care about this is that for a number of these American companies that are these platforms, this has become—if it's not already their biggest market, it will be very soon.

JAISHANKAR: Right. I mean I think those two things are not necessarily contradictory. That is, social media has made politics more democratic. And it's not just in India. We see this in the United States, we see this in Western Europe, we see it in other emerging countries, like Indonesia as well, which is having an election of its own.

At the same time, it's actually created a form of direct democracy and has actually in a weird way started to undermine the other mechanisms of democratic governance and democratic politics, some of which we had started to take for granted. And this is playing out in a few ways. One is through misinformation, and we're seeing lots of it. In some ways things like Twitter and Facebook are still in India elite platforms, but Facebook a little less so, but WhatsApp and other things are now major ways of disseminating information, including by political parties.

It has increased the theatricality of politics. So we saw this after the balakot strikes where even though you had Indian officials and military officers giving very carefully crafted statements about what India did and what the legal basis for its actions were, you had Indian political leaders, including from the ruling party, saying things that were not as diplomatic or as careful, and clearly catering to a domestic audience.

You're seeing greater gridlock. The idea that compromise is now a bad thing, you know, everywhere. Again, you're seeing this across party lines. And you're seeing greater polarization.

And so, this combination I think of misinformation, theatricality, gridlock, polarization, is leading to a set of trends that we're seeing in many different places, India included. And I'm not sure there's anything really that's been done, whether it's by social media companies, whether it's by governments, whether it's by civil society groups, to really try and address how do you not turn the clock back, because you've effectively—to mix metaphors—you've actually let the genie out of the bottle already, but how do you now try and recreate the elements of representative democracy in this new digital environment?

MADAN: So, I'm going to ask you all one last question each.

Milan, is there something in particular that you're watching over these next few weeks of the election campaign? Is there one thing that you will watch in particular?

And, second, what on May 23 when the results come out, will be the morning our time—we hope that we'll know the results by then, because otherwise it will mean there is a hung parliament or something—but would surprise you on May 23?

VAISHNAV: So, I think the one thing that many of us are looking out for is whether the Congress is going to be able to come to some kind of modus vivendi with potential alliance partners. Will it come to a tacit agreement, it not an explicit agreement, with the BSP and the SP in Uttar Pradesh in terms of how they will campaign such that the Congress will not split opposition votes. That's a real danger. The latest CSDS poll, which is the only social science poll that is done in India, shows that Congress could get 10 percent of the vote in UP. If the Congress gets 10 percent of the vote, you can be a sizeable chunk of that is coming from the opposition alliance's own demographic constituencies.

Similarly, in Delhi there have been rumors for months now about a potential alliance between the ruling Aam Aadmi Party, which control the State of Delhi, and the Congress. My view is the Congress has little hope of even getting one look of a seat if it contests on its own where they could potentially do quite well with AAP, but they have not consummated that alliance.

So, there is still time, but the hour is pretty late now with voting starting on April 11. You could start to tinker around with the later phases of elections.

But I think what would surprise me on May 23 is this question of turnout, because

we have seen a very energized electorate in India, but when you talk to people on the campaign trail—I've heard this from a number of people—I don't know if you have, Sadanand—some people thought that the kind of buzz in energy of election of past yesteryear wasn't quite there. And what is that going to mean, because part of the mobilization surge that took place in 2014 directly benefitted the BJP. It is precisely in those constituencies where turnout increased the most that the BJP vote share increased the most.

And if you don't have that kind of enthusiasm that could be somewhat problematic, I think for the ruling party.

MADAN: Sadanand, what would surprise you?

DHUME: What would surprise me enormously is if we wake up on—well, I'll already be in India, so I'll be awake, but if as the results come in we find that the Congress has pulled off the kind of upset that it pulled off in 2004 where, again, the situation seemed very similar where most people were predicting a BJP government being elected again, you had a series of people defecting to the ruling party expecting it to win, you had the stock markets pricing and a return, you had all these sort of different elements. And if, for some reason, the Congress were able to pull off this come from behind upset, that is really something that would surprise me and I'd have to spend a lot of time on Twitter explaining why I thought that wasn't going to happen.

MADAN: In 2014 Brookings did an election panel, which you can probably find online, where I think we started the results by saying what did all of us get wrong, and we will do that again on May 24 when we do a results panel discussion, which will be available online.

One of the things that I think the results will depend on turnout, and the reason I'm watching turnout is because I want to see how many young people turnouts.

But also, globally we've talked about this decline of democracy and though elections aren't the only signal of the health of a democracy, I do think they suggest something about what voters are thinking about their political systems and the incumbent.

Dhruva, I'm going to ask you the last question, why should people in the U.S. care about this election? Yes, it's big, there are 890 million people potentially who go to vote, yes, it is interesting and it's full of color, but why should Americans care? And will it make a difference what that government at the end of May, the beginning of June will look like for U.S.-India relations:

JAISHANKAR: That's a good question. I mean I think you have here a 1.3 billion person country that's a democracy, flawed in many ways, but still nonetheless a thriving democracy and an open society where public opinion of the United States is extremely positive and has remained positive—unlike many other parts of the world, including many U.S. allies—has remained positive even after the election of Donald Trump, that is a $3 trillion economy, that is growing, even if by its lower than expected standards, still growing at 7 percent, give or take a year, that has become an increasingly large trade and economic partner, that is the home country to a sizeable diaspora now in the United States. I think for all of these reasons this is an election that Americans should be paying attention to, for better or for worse.

So, I do think it will be something that will be important. And, you know, again, as the United States and India become closer strategic partners—and that is happening in

a slow, steady way with bumps along the road—it's all the more important that the United States pays attention to India's future.

MADAN: Thank you to all of you; to Sadanand Dhume from the American Enterprise Institute, Milan Vaishnav, from the Carnegie Endowment, and Dhruva Jaishankar, one of our own at Brookings, for talking us through this kind of exercise, this grand Indian festival. Do follow their work on their websites, their organizations, but also on Twitter where they will be tweeting their own work, as well as those of others who it would be interesting to follow.

So, thank you all and please do tune in for our election results panel on May 24, which will be available on line.

(MUSIC)

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