

What does Modi's personal popularity tell us about India's political landscape?

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2016-2-8

*The Prime Minister has consistently polled better than his party, the BJP, even if his overall ratings have declined. **Eviane Leidig** considers why this might be, and argues that due to the high degree of similarity between Indian political parties, the personality of potential leaders has become a crucial selling point. Modi has effectively exploited this by cultivating his own public image while maintaining a tactical distance from that of the BJP.*



A [poll](#) released by ABP News-Nielsen on 26 January rates Prime Minister Narendra Modi's performance at 54%, higher than his Bharatiya Janata Party-led government coalition at 46%. The results shouldn't be surprising given Modi's vast popularity at home and abroad. In September 2015, [Pew](#) found that 87% of Indians have a favourable view of the PM, whilst maintaining that same level of support for the BJP. Pew's poll is far more comprehensive in addressing gender, age, education level, and geographic area coverage, as well as assessing intensity of support.

But why the drastic decrease in favourability, both for Modi and the BJP? One possible indicator of attitudinal shifts is the results of Bihar's legislative assembly elections, which ran from October to November 2015. The BJP suffered a heavy defeat by centre-left party Janata Dal, [casting doubt](#) on the BJP's ability to continue mobilising voters based on the same platform used at general election.

The upcoming 2016 state legislative assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, Puducherry, and Assam, will test BJP strategy to consolidate power. Promises made in 2014 have yet to be fulfilled in several local districts. Targeting regional issues in these areas with strong incumbent performance could decisively make or break BJP representability.



Significantly, Modi and the BJP maintain a separate public image. The PM rarely becomes involved in party politics and management—at least in the public eye—leaving most issues to party leadership. This distance is advantageous at a time when the BJP [struggles](#) to pass legislation in parliament, as well as rumoured controversies

within its ministries. Governance failures are consequently linked to the BJP rather than Modi.

Modi's ability to run one of the most successful election campaigns in India's political history simultaneously revealed an extremely divided nation. ABP-Nielsen's poll reflected this division when respondents were asked detailed questions concerning the 'mood of the nation'. For instance, 47% found that Modi's popularity is decreasing day by day, whereas 45% believe the contrary.

Key to this polarisation may be how Indian media takes either an absolute pro- or anti-Modi stance. But also crucial is the PM's highly PR-driven approach. By appearing to be connected to the public and serving their needs, such as formulating new schemes and shaping government policy based on popular concerns, Modi's media image is built on progress. Headlines feature travels to meet foreign leaders (Obama, Cameron, Sharif, Hollande, etc.), announcing new initiatives, and especially any technology events that showcase India as an emerging economic powerhouse, such as the [Silicon Valley visit](#) to Facebook and Google.

At the same time, such international publicity has generated a backlash. Take, for instance, Modi's visit to the UK, which prompted a [wave of negative spotlight](#) for the PM. The Indian diaspora highlighted on the global stage Modi's past tenure as Chief Minister during the 2002 Gujarat riots, which witnessed some of the worst Hindu-Muslim communal violence in India's history. More recently, top artists and scientists [protested](#) the country's 'climate of intolerance' by returning prestigious national awards. The [criticisms](#) against Modi and his government by highly visible Bollywood actors has only deepened levels of public distrust. These condemnations have been directed towards Modi's shared platform with the BJP's broader Hindu nationalist agenda, and particularly, his past links to RSS, the BJP's activist paramilitary wing.

Despite negative accusations, the fact that Modi continues to enjoy high approval ratings is likely due to several factors. First, he refrains from discussing a Hindu national identity beyond appeals to Indian solidarity. Instead, economic development and infrastructure building are his primary talking points. Second, there is a severe lack of any credible alternative leader. Most political analysts attribute the incumbent Indian National Congress party's heavy loss during the election with their failure to promote an equally dynamic candidate. Lastly, Modi represents a new change from the status quo. His campaign slogan, *Achhe din aane waale hain* ('Good days are coming'), became part of everyday vocabulary and is still in use today.

What does this reveal about India's current landscape? It seems like the country is slowly moving out of party politics and gravitating towards charismatic figures like Modi. Part of the explanatory drivers for this shift lies within India's political structure. Unlike Western democracies, Indian political parties aren't inherently motivated by ideological differences. Certainly parties are partly driven by particular formations: Hindutva for the BJP, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty for Congress, Dalit and minority representation for Samajwadi Party, etc. But rather they tend to form on the basis of identity. Overall, as the country has transitioned from party to party, policies tend to remain fairly static (a good indicator is the relative consistency of Indian foreign policy).

Thus, when the election cycle hits, the personality of potential leaders becomes a crucial selling point. What truly drives Modi's success is his capacity to reach out beyond the traditional Hindu nationalist base to one of the most diverse societies in the world. Modi's well-crafted message via social media platforms was combined with [extensive support](#) on the ground by huge numbers of volunteers. His personal charisma, articulated through principles of anti-corruption and growth, connects to the public in a reminiscently populist vein well-suited for 21st century India. The son of a *chai wallah*, Modi is an outsider of the establishment. His reformist ideals and traditional dress (embodied by the #ModiKurta) reflects a country in transition—rooted in the past but looking towards the future.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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