Tracking Narendra Modi's Popularity

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Summary

As in the 2014 Indian general election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s trump card in the 2019 election. This paper examines the changing trends in Modi's popularity during his five-year tenure, by looking at opinion polls as well as his electoral impact during the Assembly elections held in end-2018. While Modi continues to be popular, his electoral impact seems to have diminished. At the same time, the popularity of the principal opposition leader, Congress President Rahul Gandhi, has increased over the last five years.

Introduction

There is little doubt that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) trump card and star campaigner in the coming general election. Well before the election dates have been announced, the Prime Minister has embarked on a 100-day campaign covering 20 states. If Modi was one of the primary reasons why the BJP won a majority in 2014, the question is how effective will he be this time around?

There are no easy answers to this question. One way is to resort to surveys, which are often unreliable. For instance, both the opinion and exit polls for the Assembly elections in late 2018 showed a good deal of divergence. Nevertheless, opinion polls are at least reasonable indicators of general trends.

Opinion Polls

Most opinion polls have found Modi to be extraordinarily popular well into his first term as Prime Minister. The respected Pew Global Attitudes Survey in early 2017 – around the mid-way mark of Modi's five-year tenure – found that nearly 90 per cent of the respondents held a "favourable" view of Modi (Figure 1). This number had not only been fairly steady since Modi was elected in 2014, but also cut across regions. Modi was equally popular, if not more, in South India as he was in the north. The closest competitor to Modi was Congress President Rahul Gandhi, of whom nearly 60 per cent of the respondents held a "favourable" view.

Figure 1

Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Survey

Source: Pew Research Center Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q2, Q5 & Q106c
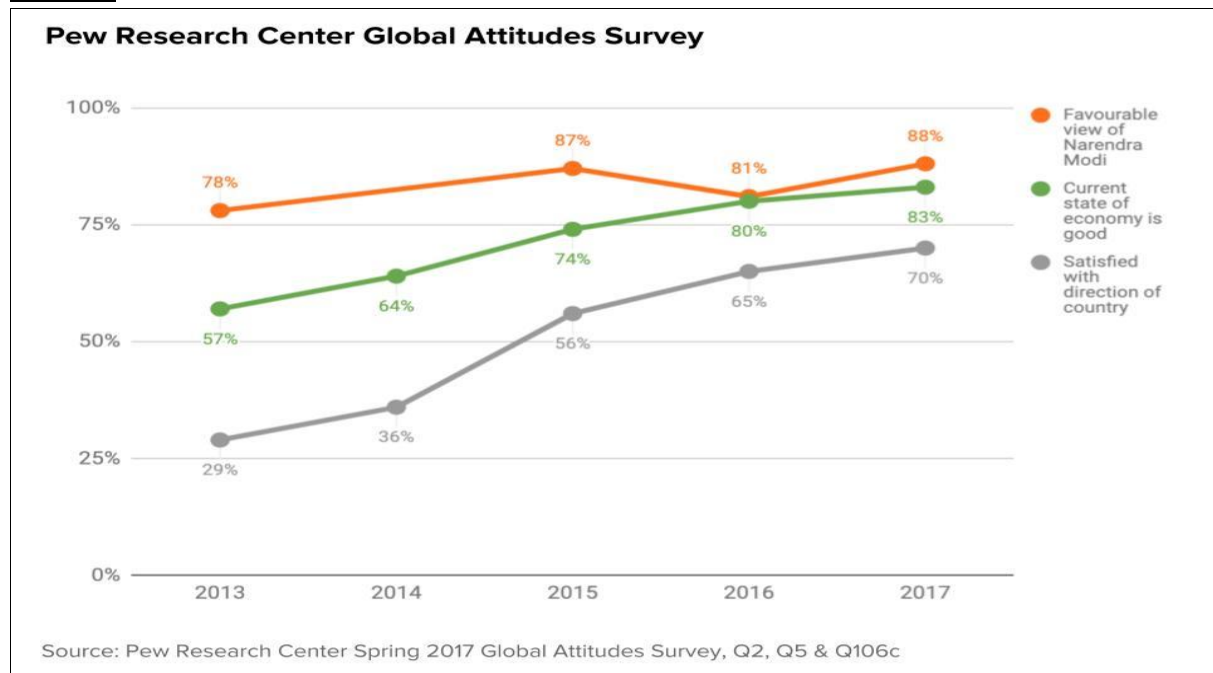
Things have, however, changed over the past year or so as surveys conducted by Indian agencies show. The Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti surveys from May 2014 onwards show that the voter's choice of Modi as Prime Minister was at its highest at 44 per cent in mid-2017, around the time the Pew survey was conducted. Since then the support for Modi has dropped significantly to 34 per cent in mid-2018. Correspondingly, the preference for Rahul has risen from an abysmal 9 per cent in 2017 to 24 per cent in mid-2018 (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Voters' Spontaneous PM Preference – Lokniti CSDS Survey

Source: Lokniti CSDS Survey
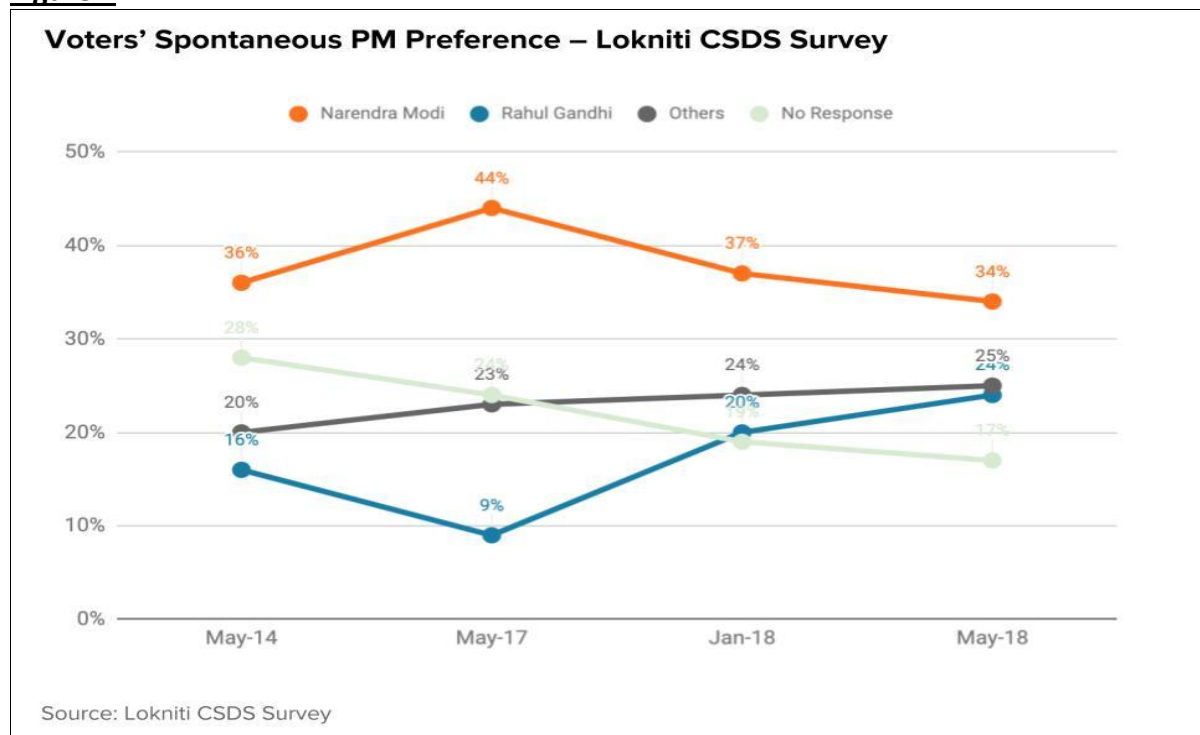
Surveys conducted by the news magazine, India Today, show a similar trend though the numbers are different. These surveys show Modi's popularity at a peak in early 2017 with 65 per cent of the respondents preferring him as Prime Minister, compared to 46 per cent by early-2019. The numbers for Rahul have, in that same period, risen from 10 to 34 per cent (Figure 3). Thus, both surveys show that Modi's popularity has fallen since its peak in 2017 and Rahul's acceptability has grown, though the gap between the two remains significant. This is particularly so in North India and the Hindi heartland (Figure 4).
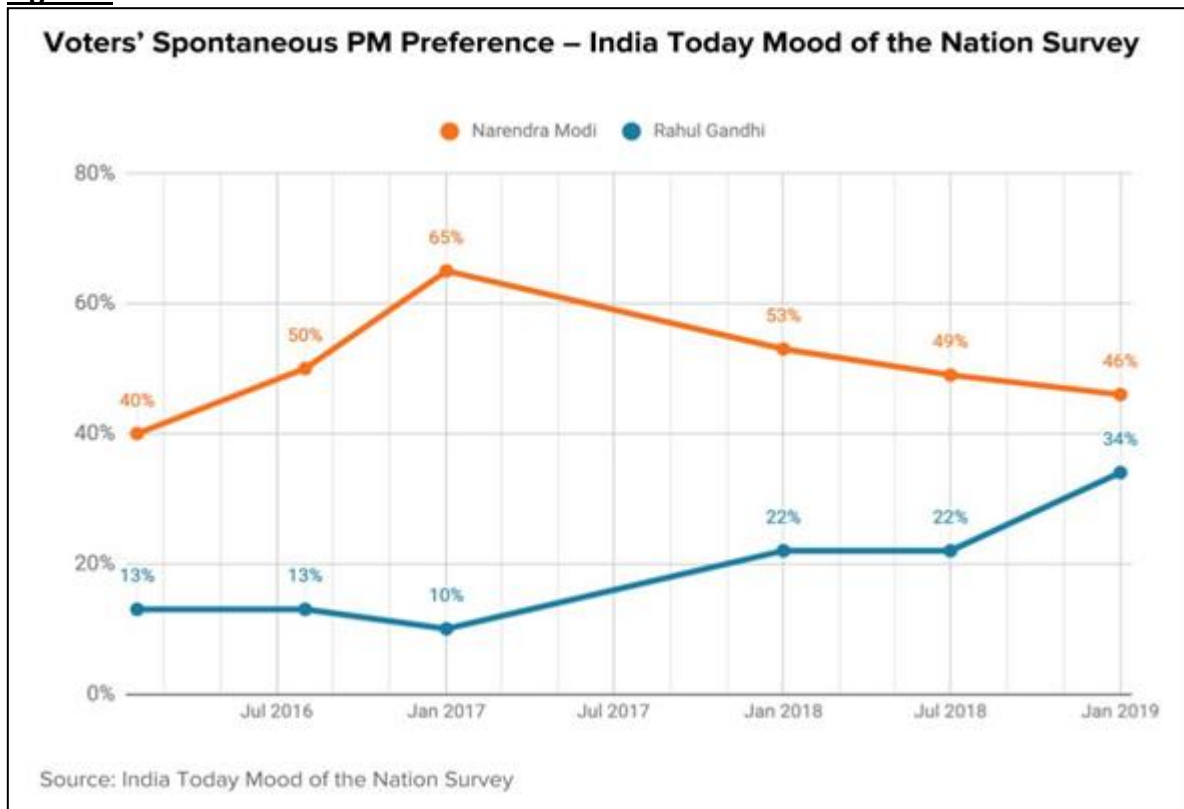
Figure 3

Voters' Spontaneous PM Preference – India Today Mood of the Nation Survey

Source: India Today Mood of the Nation Survey

Figure 4

Popularity Gap between Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi in India Today Political Stock Exchange Surveys

Modi-Rahul Popularity Gap

- Rahul Gandhi more popular by >10%
- Rahul Gandhi more popular by 0–10%
- Narendra Modi more popular by 0–10%
- Narendra Modi more popular by 10–20%
- Narendra Modi more popular by >20%

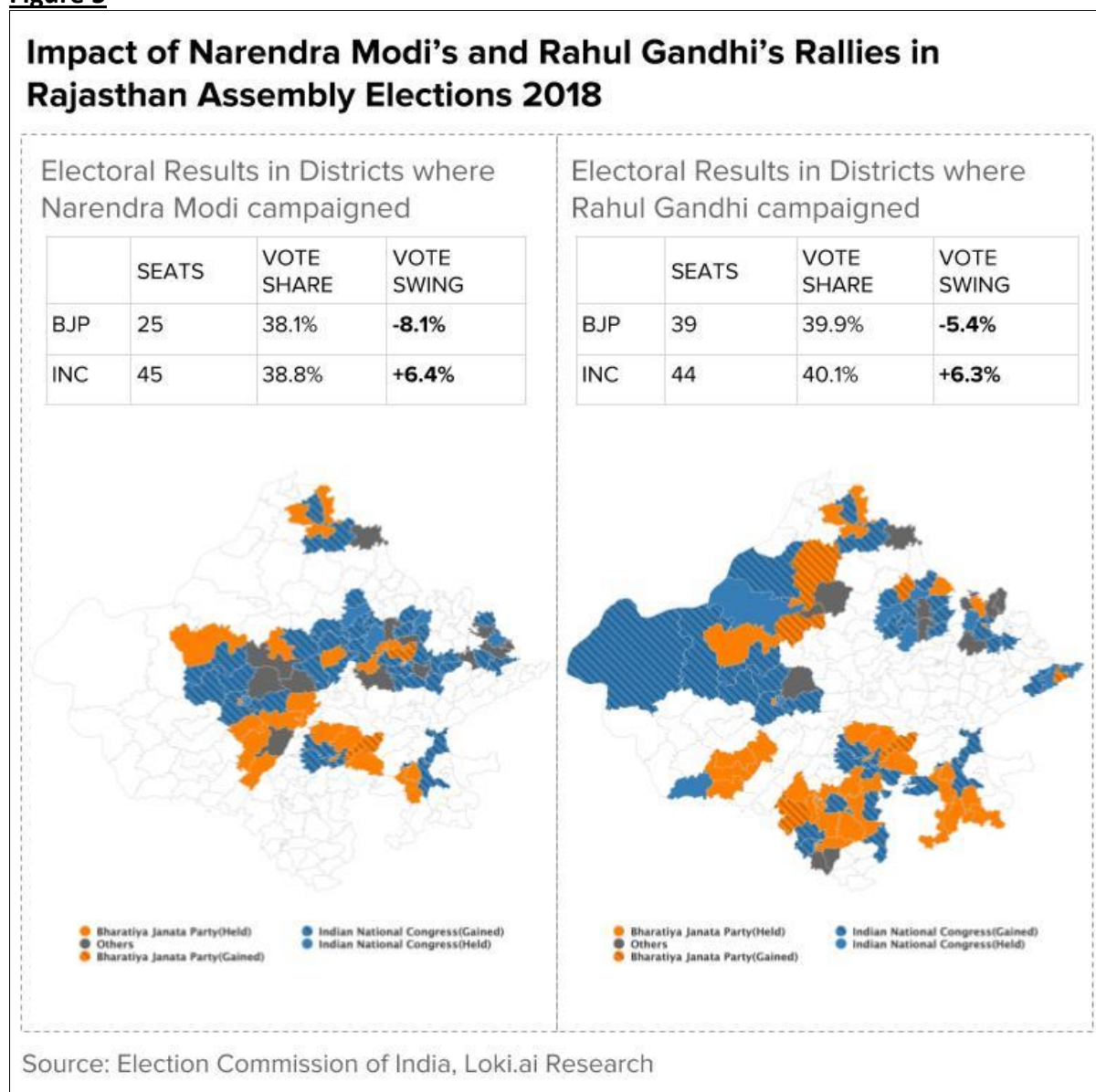Source: India Today, Loki.ai Research

Electoral Impact

Another way to gauge Modi's popularity is his impact during election campaigns. It is a commonly held view that even if the BJP is on a weak wicket, the Prime Minister's election rallies, which tend to happen in the final days of campaigning, have a perceptible impact on voters. There is evidence to suggest that the final phase of campaigning usually has a significant effect on undecided voters. There were many who felt that it was the bounce provided by Modi's rallies, at the business end of the campaign, which allowed the BJP to gain a majority in the Gujarat election in end-2017. Similarly, Modi seems to have made a difference in the Karnataka election in mid-2018 in the final days of campaigning.

For the round of elections held in end-2018 in the Hindi heartland states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the impact of Modi's rallies was less evident and weaker. Of the 29 constituencies, where Modi held rallies in the three states, the BJP won in only a third. If one were to look at it through the metrics of vote swing, the districts where Modi

4

campaigned saw an erosion of BJP votes. In Rajasthan, for instance, there was a decline of nearly 8 per cent in the BJP's vote share in the districts where Modi campaigned (Figure 5). For Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, the decline was around 7 and 3 per cent respectively (Figure 6 and 7).

In contrast, Rahul Gandhi's campaign in the three states had a positive effect for the Congress. Of the 42 constituencies where Rahul held rallies, the Congress won in nearly half. Again in the districts where Rahul campaigned, there was a significant vote swing in favour of the Congress and away from the BJP. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the swing was around 6 per cent (Figure 5 and 7) while in Chhattisgarh it was nearly 3 per cent (Figure 6).
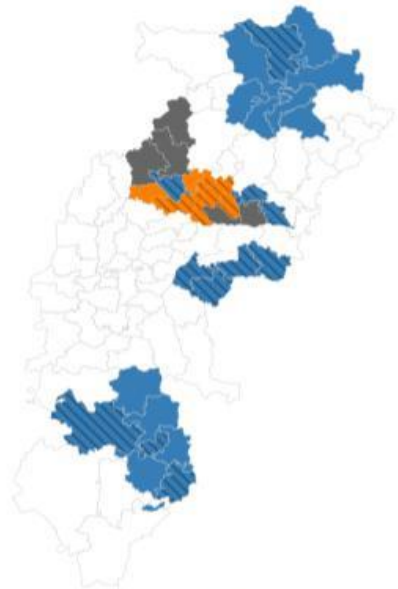
Figure 5

Impact of Narendra Modi's and Rahul Gandhi's Rallies in Rajasthan Assembly Elections 2018

Electoral Results in Districts where Narendra Modi campaigned

	SEATS	VOTE SHARE	VOTE SWING
BJP	25	38.1%	-8.1%
INC	45	38.8%	+6.4%

Electoral Results in Districts where Rahul Gandhi campaigned

	SEATS	VOTE SHARE	VOTE SWING
BJP	39	39.9%	-5.4%
INC	44	40.1%	+6.3%

● Bharatiya Janata Party(Held)   ● Indian National Congress(Gained)
● Others   ● Indian National Congress(Held)
● Bharatiya Janata Party(Gained)

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● Bharatiya Janata Party(Gained)

Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai Research

Figure 6

Impact of Narendra Modi's and Rahul Gandhi's Rallies in Chhattisgarh Assembly Elections 2018

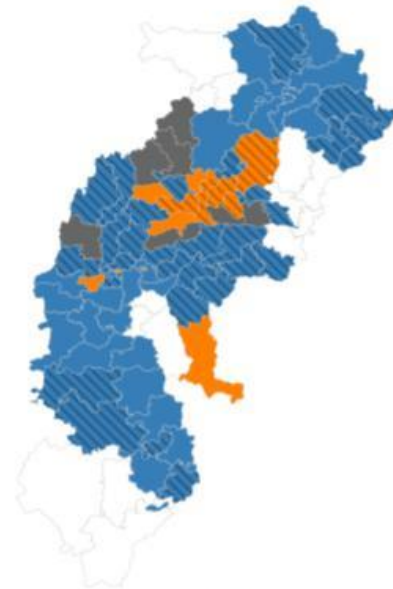## Electoral Results in Districts where Narendra Modi campaigned

	SEATS	VOTE SHARE	VOTE SWING
BJP	6	31.7%	**-6.6%**
INC	22	39.9%	**-1.3%**

Electoral Results in Districts where Rahul Gandhi campaigned

	SEATS	VOTE SHARE	VOTE SWING
BJP	12	33.0%	**-7.5%**
INC	57	43.1%	**+2.8%**

Indian National Congress(Held) Indian National Congress(Gained)
Others Bharatiya Janata Party(Held)
Bharatiya Janata Party(Gained)

Indian National Congress(Held) Indian National Congress(Gained)
Bharatiya Janata Party(Gained) Others
Bharatiya Janata Party(Held)
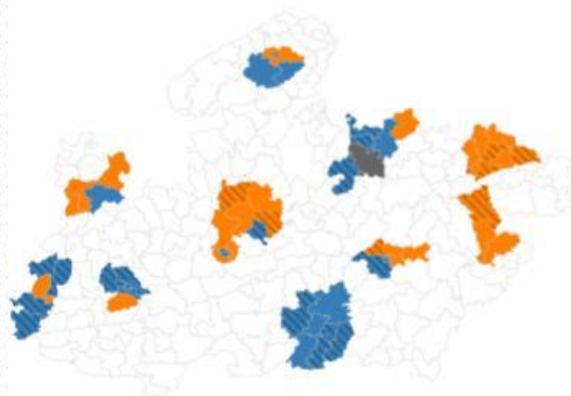
Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai Research

Figure 7

Impact of Narendra Modi's and Rahul Gandhi's Rallies in Madhya Pradesh Assembly Elections 2018

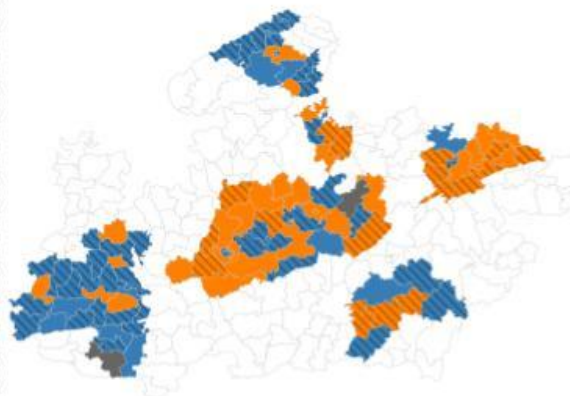### Electoral Results in Districts where Narendra Modi campaigned

	SEATS	VOTE SHARE	VOTE SWING
BJP	34	42.6%	**-3.1%**
INC	33	41.5%	**+3.6%**

Electoral Results in Districts where Rahul Gandhi campaigned

	SEATS	VOTE SHARE	VOTE SWING
BJP	53	41.4%	**-3.0%**
INC	53	41.3%	**+5.8%**

Legend (Modi map):
- Bharatiya Janata Party(Held)
- Indian National Congress(Held)
- Bharatiya Janata Party(Gained)
- Indian National Congress(Gained)
- Others

Legend (Rahul Gandhi map):
- Indian National Congress(Gained)
- Indian National Congress(Held)
- Others
- Bharatiya Janata Party(Held)
- Bharatiya Janata Party(Gained)

Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai Research

These numbers are a rough assessment of the impact of Modi in the three states since local or regional factors, particularly anti-incumbency, were also at play in determining the results. Also the numbers for Modi could have been skewed by the overall erosion of votes for the BJP in the three Hindi heartland states. However, they do suggest that Modi did not have the same kind of appeal compared to the Gujarat, Karnataka and earlier polls.

Conclusion

In sum, Modi's popularity might have declined, but he remains a formidable force, backed by a well-oiled and funded party machinery, in a presidential-style campaign. However, unlike in 2014, the BJP knows it cannot just bank on Modi and the promise of great things to come to win the coming general election. That is one of the reasons why the party has embarked on a series of last-gasp measures, such as reservation for economically weaker

sections, reviving the Ayodhya issue and a populist interim budget, to offset the fall in Modi's vote-catching abilities.

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