

The Changing Narrative of India's General Elections

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Summary

National security and terror threats have dominated the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s ongoing election campaign. The Congress and the regional opposition parties, in contrast, have tried to steer the electoral narrative to jobs and rural distress. As the issue of national security could be waning in the voters' minds, the BJP is likely to recalibrate its campaign. Above all, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will continue to be central to the BJP's presidential-style campaign and its chances of returning to power.

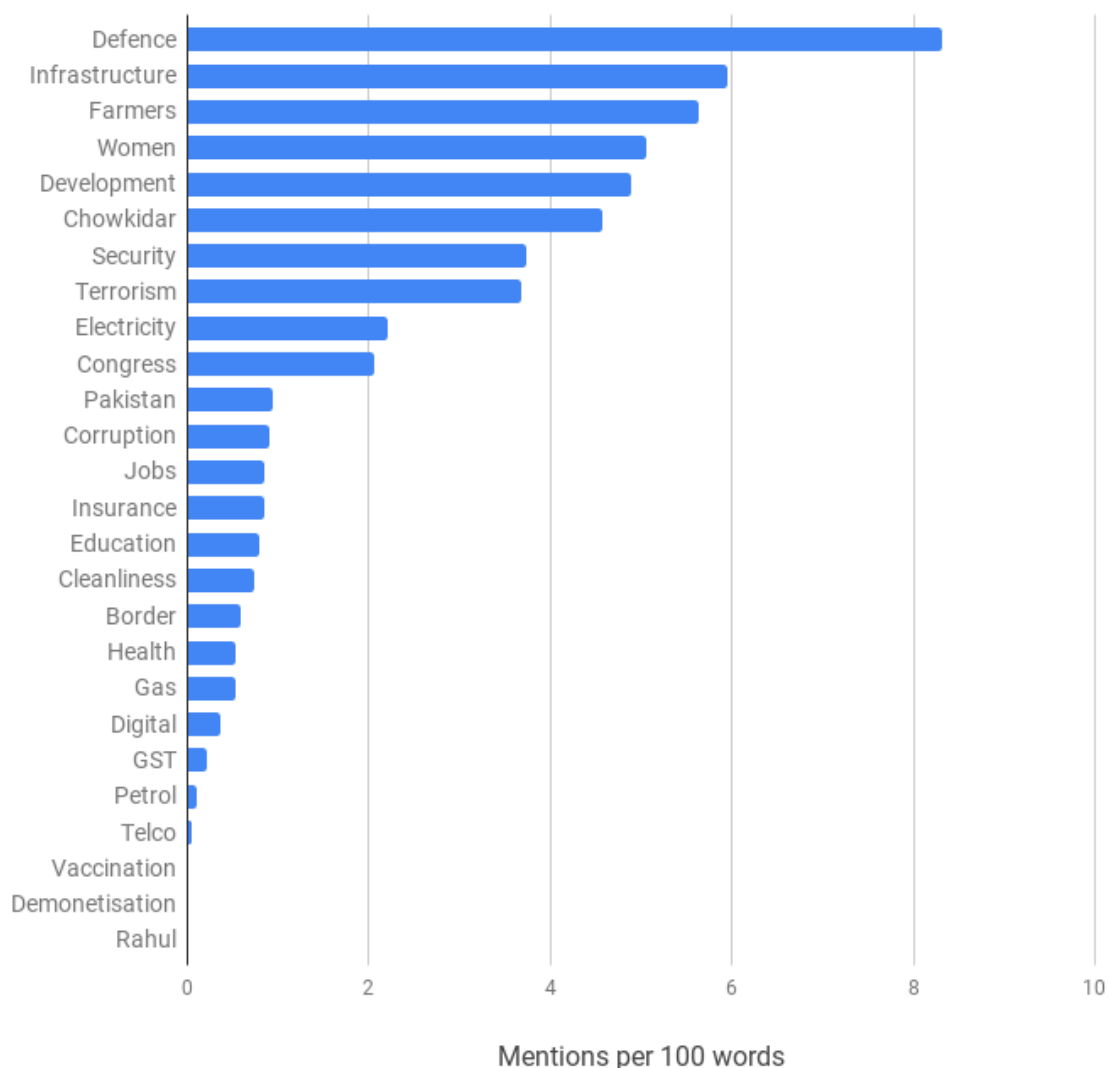
A high decibel campaign is on in India as the country is in the midst of its seven-phase general election that begun on 11 April 2019. There is little doubt that the Pulwama terror attack and the subsequent air strike in Pakistan changed the election campaign narrative quite dramatically. While opinion polls conducted immediately after the air strike found a perceptible bump for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, subsequent surveys have found that it was not at the top of voters' minds. However, Modi and the BJP have made national security a central plank of their electoral campaign and the party's election manifesto.

In contrast to the 2014 election campaign, when, as prime ministerial candidate, Modi talked about *vikas* or development, this time around he is focusing heavily on defence and national security. An analysis of Modi's speeches in March 2019 show that 'defence' finds the most mention, significantly more than infrastructure or development. Security and terrorism also figure prominently in his campaign speeches (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Most and least mentioned topics in Modi's speeches in March 2019

Most and least mentioned topics in Narendra Modi's speeches in Mar 2019

Source: Loki.ai analysis of transcripts of Narendra Modi's speeches



Source: Loki.ai

The BJP's election manifesto also emphasises national security and terror. The preamble to the manifesto titled, 'Towards a New India', [states](#): "In order to achieve our goals, we must first secure our country against internal and external aggression." The very first item of the manifesto is titled, 'Nation First'. Among the topics prominently listed in this section are 'Zero-Tolerance Approach to terrorism' and 'National Security', with the former highlighting the 2016 surgical strikes and the Balakot air strike: "We will firmly continue our policy of 'Zero Tolerance' against terrorism and extremism and will continue to give a free hand to our security forces in combating terrorism."

The BJP's campaign and in particular Modi's speeches have reflected this changed emphasis. If one goes through the Prime Minister's speeches in April 2019, the issue of Pakistan and

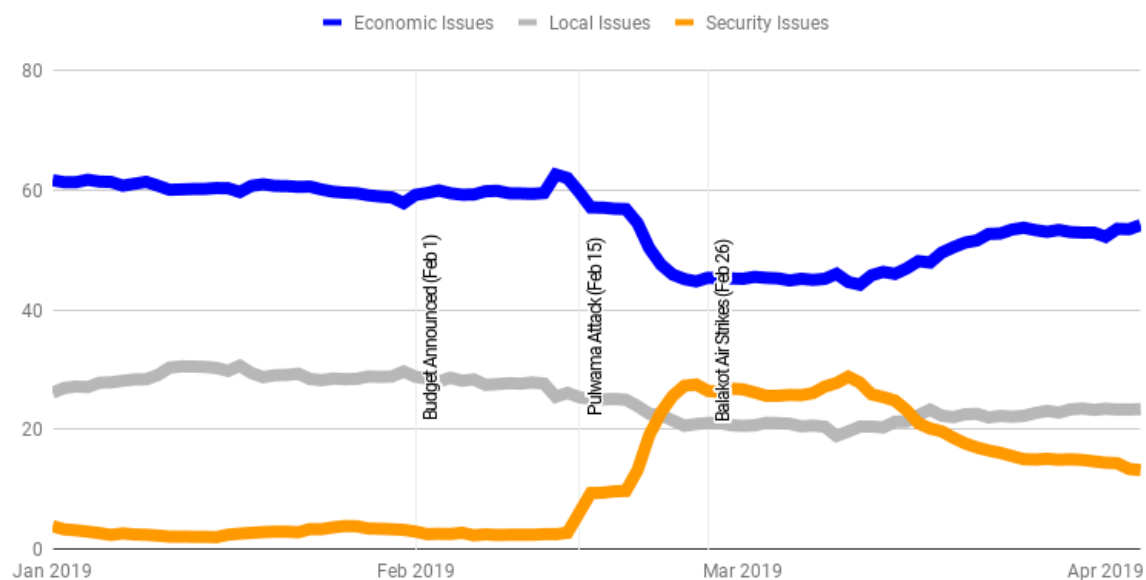
terror comes up repeatedly. In a speech in Barmer, Rajasthan, on 21 April 2019, Modi reminded voters that they are “voting against terrorism when they press the lotus [the BJP’s election symbol]”. A week earlier in Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir, on 14 April 2019, Modi said in a similar vein: “Earlier Pakistan used to give nuclear threats. Haven’t we blown that to bits? Gone are the days when the government of India used to come under pressure following threats. This is a new India and we will kill terrorists right inside their houses and also expose those supporting them.”

Interestingly, the BJP’s emphasis on national security and terror has continued despite surveys which show that in the voter’s minds the issue of national security might no longer be as important. Surveys conducted around the time the voting begun on 11 April 2019 showed that under 20 per cent of respondents felt security was the most important issue compared to around 30 per cent in the immediate aftermath of the air strike. In contrast, nearly 60 per cent of respondents said economic issues were the most important issue when polling began compared to under 50 per cent after the air strike (Figure 2). Similarly, satisfaction with Modi, which had peaked at 62 per cent after the air strike had fallen to 43 per cent, though he was still far ahead of Congress President Rahul Gandhi (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Most important electoral issues for voters

Most important electoral issues for voters over time

Source: Reuters and Quint reporting of CVoter State of the Nation Poll

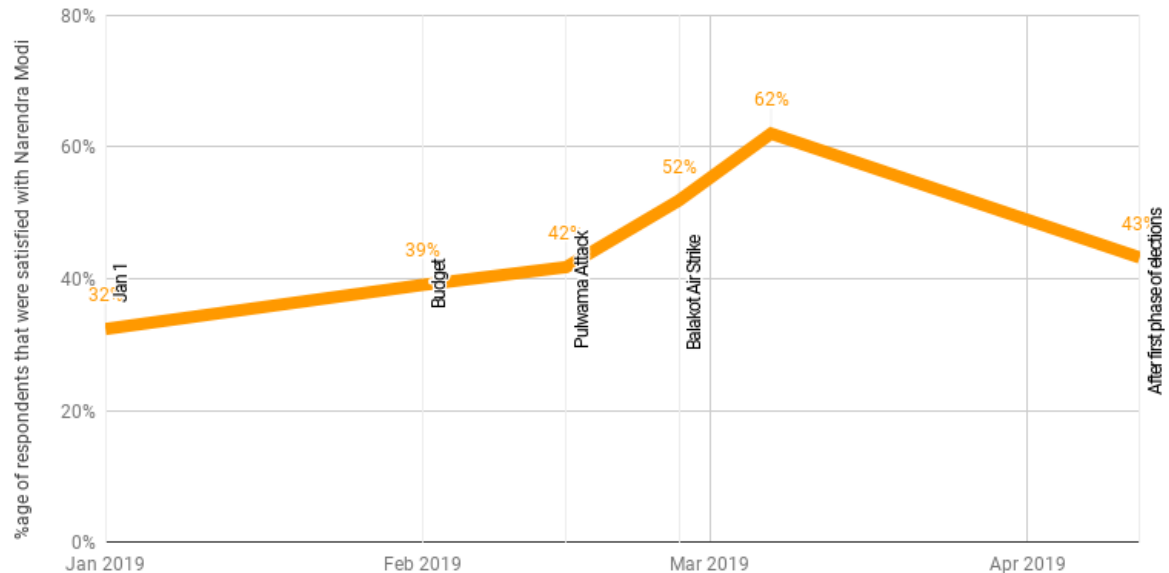


Source: Loki.ai

Figure 3: Satisfaction with working of Modi

Satisfaction with working of Narendra Modi

Source: BloombergQuint and Quint reporting of CVoter State of the Nation Poll



Source: Loka.ai

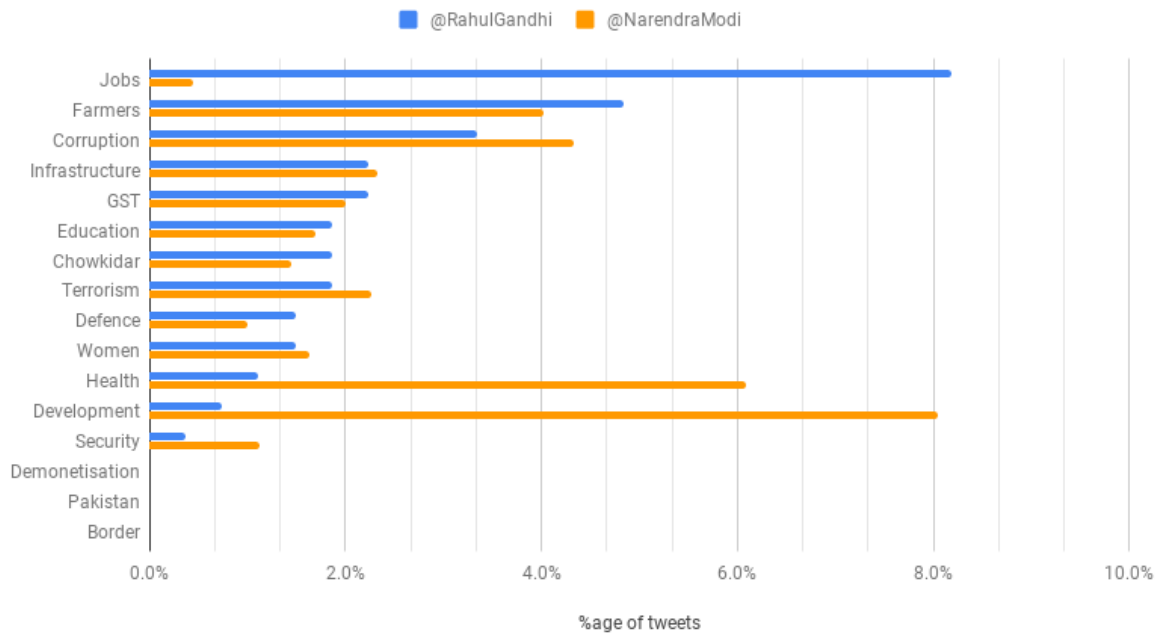
If the BJP, both in its manifesto and campaign, have kept the focus firmly on security, the opposition has by and large tried to steer the focus, not always successfully, to economic issues. The Congress manifesto, which has a strong welfare element, has highlighted economic issues. The very first section of the Congress [manifesto](#) is on jobs and it identifies unemployment as the “gravest challenge” before the country and job creation as the “highest priority”. The manifesto also showcases the Minimum Income Support Programme or NYAY, which promises a cash transfer of Rs 72,000 a year for the poorest 20 per cent of all families.

This trend is reflected on social media too. A comparison of tweets by Congress President Rahul Gandhi and Modi between January and March 2019 shows that jobs and farmers have dominated Rahul’s tweets (Figure 4). Similar trends can be noted for tweets by the Congress party (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Percentage of topics mentioned by Rahul and Modi in their tweets from Jan-Mar 2019

Percentage of topics mentioned by Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi in their tweets from Jan - Mar 2019

Source: Loki.ai analysis of tweets from official Twitter accounts of Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi

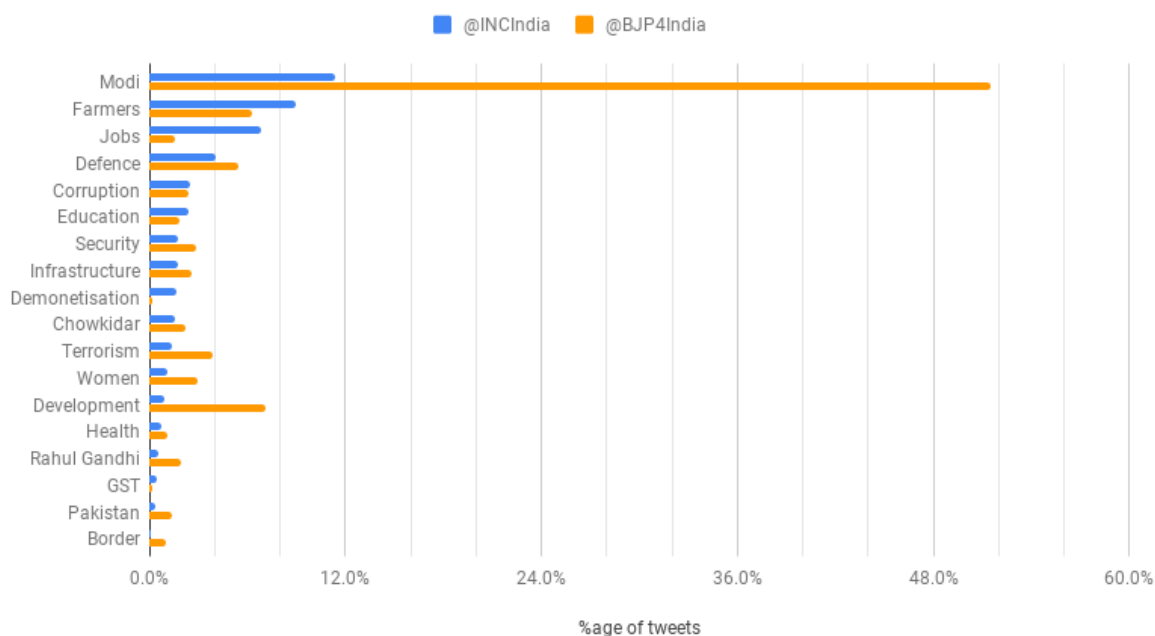


Source: Loki.ai

Figure 5: Percentage of topics mentioned by Congress and BJP for Jan-Mar 2019

Percentage of topics mentioned by Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party in their tweets from Jan - Mar 2019

Source: Loki.ai analysis of tweets from official Twitter accounts of BJP and INC



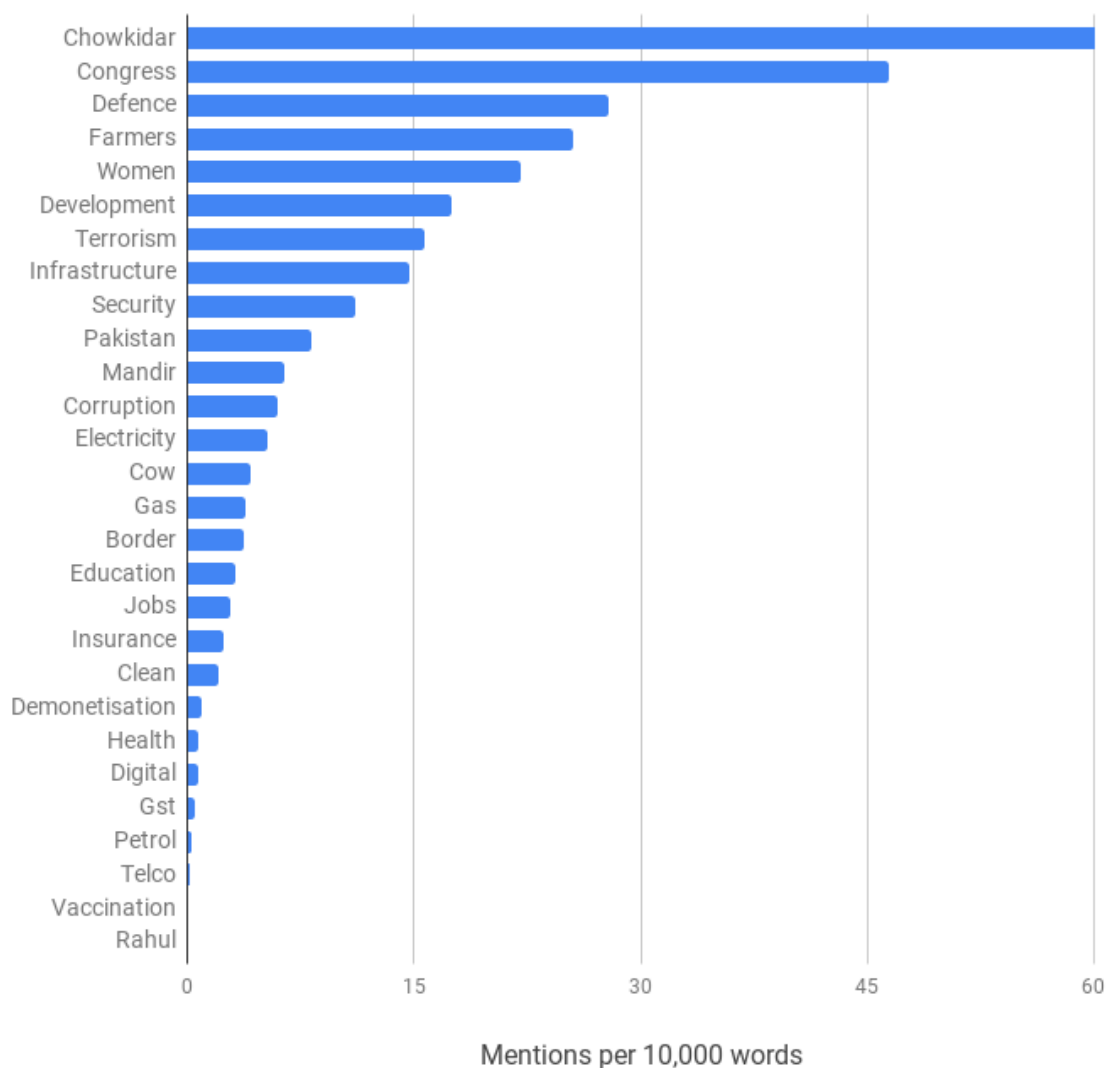
Source: Loki.ai

With the elections stretching for over six weeks, there is of course the possibility of the BJP changing the narrative if it believes that the issue of national security is losing traction. This is perhaps exemplified in its new campaign slogans such as “*Kaam Ruke Na, Desh Jhuke Na* (The work should not stop, the country should not bow)”, which marries the narrative of national security with development work. The change is reflected in Modi’s speeches too where the focus on defence and terrorism has shifted somewhat (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Most and least mentioned topics in Modi's speeches in March-April 2019

Most and least mentioned topics in Narendra Modi's speeches from 1st Mar 2019 to 18th April 2019

Source: Loki.ai analysis of transcripts of Narendra Modi's speeches from his official site



Source: Loki.ai

Above all, though, it is Modi and the absence of a credible alternative that will continue to be the BJP's primary election pitch. This is summed up by the tag line of the BJP's 2019 election campaign: "*Phir ek baar Modi sarkar* (Modi government once again)".

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