

## **Indian Elections 2024: The BJP has High Hopes in West Bengal**

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### **Summary**

*West Bengal is one of the few states where the voter turnout in the ongoing India general election has been high. Though the Bharatiya Janata Party hopes to win at least 25 of the 42 Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Parliament) seats in West Bengal, it could prove to be an uphill task, given the strength of the Trinamool Congress, the ruling party in the state.*

In a general election marked by a discernible lack of excitement, West Bengal is one of the states where the contest is a fierce one with [high voter turnout](#). One of the reasons for that is the potential that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sees in the state for increasing its seat tally. In West Bengal, the BJP surprised most people in the 2019 general elections by winning 18 seats, up from two in 2014, compared to the Trinamool Congress' (TMC) 22 seats and the Congress' two.

This time, the BJP has high hopes in West Bengal. Taking advantage of the lengthy, seven-phase election schedule for West Bengal – the only state other than Uttar Pradesh to have as many phases with the last round on 1 June 2024 – Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made several trips to the state. At the time of writing, Modi had addressed 17 election rallies in West Bengal with the number expected to rise to 25 by the time the poll campaign ends. Home Minister Amit Shah has even predicted that the BJP would [win 24 to 30 seats](#) in West Bengal. Like the overall prediction of 370 seats for the BJP, there might be some hyperbole here since Shah had [predicted over 200 seats](#) for his party during the West Bengal Assembly elections in 2021 where the BJP won 77 seats. However, the feeling within the party is that there is a scope for improvement in West Bengal.

Surveys show a close contest in the state. The survey by [India Today](#) in January 2024 predicted a neck-to-neck contest with 22 seats for the TMC and 19 for the BJP. A more recent survey by [ABP-CVoter](#) made similar predictions with [20 seats for the BJP](#). However, there are others, including [TV18's opinion poll](#) and political strategist Prashant Kishore, who have pegged the BJP at a higher tally of around 25 seats.

Looking beyond surveys, the last two general elections and Assembly election – held in 2021 – provide clues. As elsewhere in India, there is a disparity in the BJP's performance in the general elections and Assembly elections. In the 2014 general election, the BJP dramatically increased its vote share in West Bengal from four per cent in the 2011 Assembly elections to 17 per cent and also won two seats. However, the BJP's vote share fell in the 2016 Assembly elections where it won 10 per cent of the vote and only three seats. Since 2016 though, the BJP has replaced the Left Front as the main opposition party in the state.

The cycle of the BJP's vote share falling in the Assembly elections compared to the national elections continued in the 2019 general elections and 2021 Assembly polls. The TMC's performance in 2021 – winning 215 out of 292 seats in the West Bengal Assembly with a vote share of nearly 48 per cent – bettered its showing in the 2016 election. The party's victory was comprehensive, cutting across region, religion, caste, class and gender. For the BJP, which had banked on bettering its dramatic gains in the 2019 general election, the result was a blow. The BJP won 77 seats and 38 per cent of the vote share, which was considerably lower than the 121 Assembly segments and 40 per cent vote share it had won in 2019, but was still a significant jump from the 2016 election.

In the ongoing general election, the BJP is, once again, expected to do better than the 2021 Assembly elections, primarily due to the presidential nature of the general elections, which swings several states the BJP's way. However, the sentiments on the ground seem to suggest that the BJP could struggle to better its performance of 2019. Besides the existing strength of the TMC and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her constant effort to make the campaign local rather than national, there are a few factors that could constrain the BJP.

First, the BJP might be too dependent on Modi's charisma and appeal with the party's local organisation still lacking the wherewithal to match the TMC. Part of this lies in the party's campaign being headed by a former TMC leader, Suwendu Adhikari. This makes it difficult for the BJP to distinguish itself from the TMC, particularly on issues such as corruption and violence, since Adhikari himself has corruption allegations against his name and has a strongman image. Second, the elevation of Adhikari in the BJP's ranks has created internal discontent. It has also resulted in the sidelining of long-time party members like former BJP state president, Dilip Ghosh, who was moved from the constituency he had won in 2019, Medinipur, to Bardhaman-Durgapur. Third, issues like the Citizenship Amendment Act have not got the traction among Hindu migrants from Bangladesh that the BJP expected, and it could even boomerang on the party. Similarly, the violence, allegedly perpetrated by TMC leaders against women in Sandeshkhali in south Bengal, had been played up by the BJP in their campaign. However, it has also possibly not proven to be a big vote-getter for the BJP with a [controversy over the veracity of the allegations](#).

While it might be difficult for the BJP to increase its seat share in West Bengal in the general election, the results have to be seen in the context of its long-term goal of winning the Assembly election in the future.

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