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Elections in Four Indian States: A Test for the BJP and Modi

Elections will be held in four States and one Union Territory in April and May 2016. The polls will be a crucial test for the governing Bharatiya Janata Party at the Centre and a gauge of the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, two years into his tenure.

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Four States in India – Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala and Assam – and one Union Territory, Puducherry, will go to the polls in April and May 2016. The results of all the State elections will be announced on 19 May. The elections will be a crucial test for the governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the Centre, which suffered a huge defeat in the Assembly polls in Bihar State in late-2015, preceded by a spectacular defeat in the Delhi Assembly elections. The polls will also be an indicator of the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Since all the four election-bound States are not traditional strongholds of the BJP, and are governed either by the Congress or regional parties, the polls will also be a barometer of how much the BJP has been able to widen its political base under Mr. Modi. In terms of seats in the Rajya Sabha (Upper

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House of national Parliament) the four States are, however, unlikely to pay much dividend for the BJP.

Tamil Nadu

The elections in Tamil Nadu will be held on 16 May. The contest as usual will be between the two main Dravidian parties in the State – the governing All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Although Tamil Nadu has had a cyclical electoral pattern where the government alternates between these two State-level rivals, this election could see the trend being bucked with the AIADMK and Chief Minister J Jayalithaa returning to power. One of the reasons for the AIADMK having an edge is the disarray in the DMK ranks with the ageing party patriarch, M Karunanidhi, caught up with succession issues as well as corruption scandals. Thus, in the 2014 national elections, the AIADMK swept the polls winning 37 of the 39 Lok Sabha seats in the State. Over the past few months, however, the AIADMK's ascendancy has been threatened by the inadequate response of the government to the devastating floods in the State in end-2015 as well as rumours of the poor health of the Chief Minister.

Alliances between the different political parties could also have an impact on the electoral outcome. At the time of writing, the DMK and the Congress had entered into a formal pact, reviving a relationship that had existed in the 2011 election. The DMK had tried to include the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK), led by actor Vijayakant, as part of its alliance but did not succeed. The DMDK, which had tied up with the AIADMK in the 2011 election, is contesting on its own. The DMDK won a significant 29 seats and around 8% of the vote share in 2011; the party, however, slipped to 5% of the vote in the 2014 national election. The BJP, which for the first time won a seat in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of national Parliament) from Tamil Nadu in the 2014 national elections, will be looking to build on that performance. Though the BJP contested as part of an alliance with five regional parties in 2014, it is in talks with the AIADMK for a tie-up to boost its chances in the coming election. There is also a third front – the People's Welfare Alliance – comprising the two Left Parties, Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Communist Party of India (CPI), and smaller regional political outfits, the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), in the fray.

Tamil Nadu National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 (at the time results were declared). Source: Election Commission of India

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly
Total Seats	39	234
AIADMK	37 (45% of vote)	150 (38%)
DMK	0 (24% of vote)	23 (22%)
BJP	1 (6% of vote)	0 (2%)
Congress	0 (4% of vote)	5 (9%)
DMDK	0 (5% of vote)	29 (8%)

West Bengal

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee are well-placed to return to power in West Bengal where the elections will be held in six phases between 4 April and 5 May. The Election Commission has justified the lengthy election period on grounds of security though Ms Banerjee has made her displeasure known. For the record, the 2011 election too was held over six phases. After the TMC ended the CPI(M)-led Left Front's 34-year rule in West Bengal in 2011 by winning 184 of the 294 Assembly seats, the Left's fortunes have steeply declined in the State. In the 2014 national election, the TMC won 34 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats whereas the Left Front, comprising the CPI(M), the CPI, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, was reduced to only 2 seats. The Left parties have not yet recovered from the mass desertion of its cadre to the TMC though an informal tie-up with the Congress gives it a better chance in the coming election. Although opinion is sharply divided on the TMC's performance in the past five years, Ms Banerjee's charisma combined with the strength of the TMC's cadre makes her party the frontrunner.

Like in Tamil Nadu, the Congress and the BJP are marginal players in West Bengal. The Congress, which contested the 2011 elections in alliance with the TMC, went alone for the 2014 national elections. It did somewhat better than expected and won four seats while the BJP won two. For the coming elections, the Congress and the Left have gone in for an informal seat-sharing adjustment. The alliance has the potential of taking the fight to the TMC in certain

parts of Bengal, though how well it will work on the ground remains to be seen. A recent opinion poll has, however, reported that, despite the opposition alliance, the TMC is likely to win over 150 seats. The BJP, which saw a spike in its vote share in the 2014 elections, has not been able to capitalise on those gains, and is likely to be in fourth place by a long margin. In the outgoing Assembly, the BJP has only one seat which it won in a by-election.

West Bengal National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 (at the time results were declared)

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly
Total Seats	42	294
Trinamool Congress	34 (40% of vote)	184 (39%)
Left Front	2 (30% of vote)	62 (40%)
Congress	4 (10% of vote)	42 (9%)
BJP	2 (17% of vote)	0 (4%)

Kerala

Like Tamil Nadu, in Kerala the government has traditionally rotated between two political formations. Going by history, in the coming election, to be held on 16 May, the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) is likely to defeat the incumbent Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF). Latest opinion polls too predict that the LDF will get a majority in the 140-member Assembly. The UDF's position has been weakened by a string of corruption scandals, including a multi-crore 'solar' scam involving Chief Minister Oomen Chandy. Though the CPI(M) is faction-ridden, and relations between Pinarayi Vijayan, the State's party secretary, and V S Achutanandan, the party's most well-known leader and a former Chief Minister, are strained, the weaknesses of the incumbent government will help the LDF's cause. The BJP has been gaining in strength in the State, having won 10% of the vote share in the 2014 national elections. An improved performance is, however, unlikely to translate into seats though there is a good chance that the party might open its account for the first time in the Kerala Assembly.

Kerala National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 (at the time results were declared)

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly
Total Seats	20	140
UDF	12 (42% of vote)	72 (46%)
LDF	8 (40% of vote)	68 (45%)
BJP	0 (10% of vote)	0 (6%)

Assam

Assam, which will have polling in two phases on 4 and 11 April, is the only State where the BJP stands a realistic chance of forming government. The BJP, which won 5 seats in the 2011 Assembly elections, dramatically improved its performance in the 2014 national elections winning seven of 14 Lok Sabha seats and getting 37% of the vote-share. For the coming election, the BJP has tied up with two regional parties, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodo People's Front (BPF). In a departure from its strategy in Bihar, the BJP is projecting Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, a Member of Parliament from Assam, as its chief ministerial candidate. The BJP's alliance with regional parties and the anti-incumbency sentiments against the Congress and Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, who completes three terms at the helm, should have given a decisive advantage to the BJP. However, the BJP's tie-up with the AGP, with the latter having been allocated only 24 seats to contest, has caused discontentment in both parties. Besides, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), led by business tycoon Badruddin Ajmal, is popular among Muslim voters and expected to perform well in Lower Assam. Indeed, in case of a hung House, the AIUDF is likely to back the Congress.

Assam National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 (at the time results were declared).

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly
Total Seats	14	126
Congress	3 (30% of vote)	79 (39%)
BJP	7 (37% of vote)	5 (11%)
AGP	0 (4% of vote)	9 (16%)
AIUDF	3 (15% of vote)	18 (13%)
BPF	0 (2% of vote)	12 (6%)

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