

# Special Section on Politics and Society Between Elections

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We are happy that through this special section of *Studies in Indian Politics*, we bring together papers based on a joint project undertaken by Lokniti and Azim Premji University.

Politics and Society between Elections, a research collaboration between Azim Premji University and the Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy of the Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), is a public opinion study of the social and political universes Indian citizens inhabit in times between elections.<sup>3</sup> Covering 23 states and the National Capital Region of Delhi, this survey delves into a range of topics of particular interest to social scientists studying contemporary India such as the interactions between citizens and between state institutions and the citizens, and the sorts of perceptions, attitudes and opinions that everyday forms of governance produce within society in periods between elections. And importantly, this survey also serves as a snapshot of public opinion at this moment in India's political development—one that we consider extremely significant and with long-term implications for democratic deepening.

This project was motivated by a belief that while a great deal is known about politics and society during elections, our knowledge of politics and society between elections is relatively underdeveloped. Since the mid-1990s, Lokniti's National Election Studies (NES) have systematically researched electoral behaviour in India, covering parliamentary and state assembly elections since 1996 (Chhibber & Verma, 2014; Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009; Palshikar et al., 2014, 2017; Shastri et al., 2009; Shastri et al., Forthcoming; also, special issues of *Asian Survey* (2012, vol. 52, issue 2), *Economic and Political Weekly* (2004, vol. 51, 2009, vol. 39 and 2014, (vol. 39), *Studies in Indian Politics* (2015, vol. 3(1) and 2019, vol. 7(2)) and *Indian Politics and Policy* (vol. 3(1)). Numerous commentaries have also appeared periodically in leading newspapers such as *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*, among

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<sup>3</sup> The overall findings of the study are presented in Swaminathan and Palshikar (2020). Details of the survey including summary reports, sampling design, States covered, and the survey instrument are available at Lokniti ([lokniti.org](http://lokniti.org)) and The Centre for Regional Political Economy ([crpe.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in](http://crpe.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in)).

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others. Today, the NES is widely recognized as the benchmark of electoral research in India precisely because of the important insights these data have generated about voter behaviour and the party system (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

Indeed, there have been nationally representative surveys (e.g., the State of Democracy in South Asia Team (2008, 2013), and the State of the Nation Surveys ([SONS] conducted by Lokniti) that have not coincided with electoral cycles and have sought to investigate citizens' attitudes and opinions across a host of issues, from economic reform to state–citizen relations. No doubt these studies have contributed to our understanding of politics and society once elections are over, and now we know more about citizens' levels of trust in political institutions, citizen–state interfaces, citizen access to public services and satisfaction with governance processes. In addition, ethnographic and case studies based on studies in specific parts of India and in particular fields of citizen–state interaction have also contributed to our current insights into these questions (Gupta, 2012). But the basic point stands: our knowledge of such matters is relatively meagre.

While we know that a great deal of distance marks state–citizen interactions between elections, there still are unanswered questions, such as 'what accounts for the variation in public opinion across states, caste-community identity, economic class and gender, among others?' and 'are observed patterns generalizable?', about the nature of this distance and what explains this distance between political actors and citizens in everyday governance. These questions lie at the heart of a fuller understanding of the problems of everyday governance and political development in India, and Politics and Society between Elections surveys provide us with the data required to enable a systematic engagement with such questions.

We make a distinction between electoral and non-electoral politics based on the idea that elections are episodic while governance is routine. Electoral politics is focused on mobilizing the electorate, and consequently, elections are periods of heightened popular mobilization. Between elections, however, governments seek to consolidate their mandate through public policy and an attention to the minutiae of everyday governance. Spaces for engagement between state and citizens either expand or contract in times between elections. And similarly, horizontal citizenship ties either strengthen or fray in times between elections. Public opinion shapes and in turn is shaped by politics and society between elections.

We recognize that periods between elections and during elections are not distinct, and that the lines between the electoral and non-electoral are blurred. These periods are not disconnected from one another. On the contrary, electoral politics drive post-election public policy; for instance, a number of campaign promises often find fruition through policy once governments get elected. And much of what happens in society between elections often fuels electoral demands and finds purchase in future elections. Yet, we find this distinction to be useful. Dimming the partisan lens allows us to view individuals as citizens and not just as voters.

In this collection of articles, five critical themes are examined. Drawing richly from the Politics and Society between Elections surveys, grounded in strong theoretical foundations and a robust literature review, and utilizing rigorous statistical methods, these articles address particular themes of interest relating to politics and society without the specific political context of an election.

In his paper 'Historical Burden or Lacking Effort? Caste Perceptions of Dalit Socio-Economic Conditions', Siddharth Swaminathan addresses the question of how upper castes in India view the socio-economic conditions of the Dalits. The paper tests two hypotheses to explain upper caste attitudes towards the Dalits: Bias Hypothesis and Unfair Treatment Hypothesis. The paper concludes that the different forms of 'graded inequality' are a natural corollary to how individuals belonging to the upper castes perceive Dalits.

In her paper ‘The Effect of Affect: Friendship, Education and Nationalist Politics in India’, Asha Venugopalan examines the role of positive inter-group relations in sustaining peace among Hindus and Muslims in India. The paper additionally assesses whether access to education (as a harbinger of liberal values) reduces prejudice. The paper concludes that a Hindu having a Muslim friend is significantly correlated with a more positive outlook towards the Muslim community though access to education does not reduce prejudice.

In their paper ‘School Choice and Implementation: Survey Evidences across Indian States’, Srikrishna Ayyangar, Sham Kashyap, Prateeti Prasad and B. Rishikesh present an analysis on ‘school choice’ as a site to study preferences of public and private services. The paper suggests that data on school choices mask important state-level differences and major volatility within states and ‘substantially larger underserved populations’. The paper makes out a case for further in-depth studies at the state level to understand the context and aspirations of the underserved.

In their paper ‘Governance, Public service delivery and Trust in Government’, Jyoti Mishra and Vibha Attri study ‘governance as access’ from the prism of efficiency, responsiveness and approachability. The paper concludes that if citizens benefit from the welfare schemes of the state, they are more likely to trust the state government. Their real-life experience with availing public services and the nature of their interaction with the state machinery also impact on the levels of trust citizens place on the state government.

In their paper ‘BJPs Ideological Hegemony: Combining Nationalism with Hindutva’, Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta explain BJP’s ideological dominance from the twin perspectives of assertive nationalism and Hindutva. The paper draws attention to the success of BJP’s strategy of bringing together its religious conservatism with issues of strident nationalism. The extent of the shift to the right of the ‘median voter’ will determine BJP’s long-term prospects and stability.

Taken together, these papers shed light on critical dimensions of sociopolitical attitudes of citizens in India and provide an explanation to the emerging trends and point to new puzzles.

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