

India's 2022 State Elections: A Preview

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Overview

Some Members of Congress express concern about the state of Indian democracy and human rights. Five of India's 28 states are conducting elections to seat state legislators to five-year terms; results are to be announced on March 10. The outcomes may provide indications of the current strength of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's national-ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of national elections scheduled for early 2024. State assemblies elect state government heads, known as chief ministers (CMs). BJP CMs are incumbent in the bellwether state of Uttar Pradesh (UP, population 200 million), as well as in Uttarakhand (11 million), Manipur (3 million), and Goa (1.5 million); of the five, only Punjab (30 million) has an incumbent non-BJP CM, a member of the Indian National Congress Party (or "Congress").

These elections are [widely seen](#) as a referendum on the BJP's performance after it won national reelection in 2019. Analysts [contend](#) that a BJP defeat in any of the four states it controls—especially UP—would suggest public dissatisfaction is growing in response to India's [sluggish](#) economic growth, high [unemployment](#), proposed changes to [farm](#) and [citizenship](#) laws, and the government's [handling](#) of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and would thus be a blow to the BJP. Meanwhile, failure by the Congress Party to prevail in any of the five elections—especially in Punjab—could [threaten](#) the once-dominant, but now declining party's future as a national political force. (For more on India's domestic politics, see [IF10298](#).)

Uttar Pradesh

UP is India's most populous state and prize electoral jewel. The BJP won convincingly there in both 2017 state-level and 2019 national elections with an overt "[Hindu first](#)" agenda that marginalized Muslims, who account for [one-fifth](#) of UP's population. CM Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu monk and hardline Hindu nationalist [hand-picked](#) for the job by Modi in 2017, leads a state party that appears to be campaigning [mainly](#) on religious and caste issues. Polls [show](#) this may be a winning approach, despite [reports](#) that voters say they are more focused on unemployment and inflation. The main contenders to unseat the BJP are the regionally powerful, caste-based Samajwadi Party led by Akhilesh Yadav (CM from 2012 to 2017) and the Bahujan Samaj Party. In 2017, the BJP [won](#) nearly 40% of votes and 77% of assembly seats without fielding a Muslim candidate.

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The BJP's performance in UP could be a [key test](#) of the party's popularity headed into 2024 national elections. Anti-incumbency sentiments [typically](#) are strong in the state, so even a close BJP reelection would be seen as solidifying the party's state dominance and bolstering its national standing, as well as positioning Adityanath as a [leading contender](#) to eventually succeed Modi as prime minister. Conversely, a BJP loss [likely](#) would damage Modi's popularity nationally, cast doubt on Adityanath's political aspirations, and make the 2024 elections more competitive for opposition parties.

Punjab

Punjab is India's only Sikh-majority state. The fertile agrarian state was instrumental in the [farmers' protest](#) movement that shook the national capital and Indian politics for most of 2021. Modi's rare [political retreat](#) on the controversial farms laws in late 2021 may have been partly [motivated](#) by electoral considerations, but a strong BJP showing is [considered](#) unlikely in Punjab. The party has a limited footprint and [diminished](#) prospects there due to what was seen as the national government's heavy-handed [response](#) to the protests. Unemployment is a [major issue](#) in the current campaign. The Congress Party displaced an alliance of the BJP and regional powerhouse Shiromani Akali Dal in 2017, but the state's [employment woes](#) have increased, providing an opening for the anti-corruption-oriented Aam Aadmi Party, as well as for newcomer Sanyukt Samaj Morcha, a coalition of farmers' unions that emerged from the protests. Analysts are [watching](#) to see if that social movement can become a new electoral force. Meanwhile, the incumbent Congress has struggled with internal disarray—former CM Amarinder Singh [quit](#) the party in late 2021 and aligned with the BJP—and Congress's [waning](#) national fortunes would suffer a [major blow](#) with the loss of Punjab.

Congressional Interest

Since 2005, successive U.S. Administrations have pursued a [strategic partnership](#) with India; in September 2021, the two countries' leaders [asserted](#) that “strengthening democratic values and institutions” was central to the vision guiding the partnership. Numerous assessments of the status of Indian democracy have concluded that, under the Modi/BJP government, there has been significant “[backsliding](#),” with India being driven “[toward authoritarianism](#),” in large part due to Hindu nationalist policies that [marginalize](#) and [persecute](#) the country's large Muslim minority, as well as [Christians](#) and other religious minorities (80% of Indians are Hindus). [Hate speech](#) and [disinformation](#) increasingly are deployed in civic spaces, and activists and analysts [criticize](#) Indian leaders for failing to condemn incitements to violence. The State Department documents extensive [human rights](#) and [religious freedom](#) problems in India, as do independent watchdogs, who note [intensified](#) crackdowns on [journalists](#) and the [free press](#), [NGOs](#), [artists](#), and perceived government [critics](#), and the use of anti-terrorism laws to [quell dissent](#).

The Biden Administration has identified India as a key partner in its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), and has prioritized cooperation with the democracies of “[the Quad](#),” including India, and some Members of Congress have welcomed such a strategy. Some [analysts](#) suggest that the United States has remained largely silent about India's perceived democratic decline due to “pragmatic” considerations about balancing against China; one [argues](#) that such “pragmatism ... has badly affected the credibility of the Western commitment to democracy.” Another [contends](#) that illiberalism and further democratic erosion will “make India a less powerful and predictable international actor, and would reduce its capacity for reassurance and building partnerships with other states, including the U.S.” A repeat victory by the Hindu nationalist BJP in UP's state election and significant electoral failures by opposition parties likely would empower the BJP in ways that could continue—and potentially accelerate—the negative trends in India's democracy and human rights setting. Some Members of Congress have in the recent [past](#) expressed [concerns](#) about these [trends](#) and their [implications](#) for U.S. interests.

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