

Why India's next election will last 44 days

INDIA'S ELECTIONS ARE THE LARGEST democratic exercise in the world, with nearly 970 million registered voters expected to cast ballots, including 18 million new voters. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has announced that this year's poll will take place in seven phases, lasting 44 days. Indians will head to the polls from April 19 to June 1. Results are to be declared on June 4.

HISTORIC TIMELINE The election will be the second longest polling exercise in India's electoral history. Balloting is broken down not only by phase but also by region, all in the hope of administering an orderly election. In some states like Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, voting will take place on all seven days the ECI has

announced—April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25, and June 1. In others, like Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, balloting will take place on only one day.

SCATTERED APPROACH The regional phases of India's elections are determined based on how populated—as well as how contentious—the vote might be in each state. For example, voting in the most densely populated state of Uttar Pradesh, which is also notorious for political intimidation and electoral influence, is broken up into seven phases. Only in the end, after all ballots have been cast nationwide, are

votes counted. The tally and the announcement of the results happen on the same day. No one—including Prime Minister Narendra Modi—knows who won any given seat beforehand.

FREE AND FAIR? The election is coming at a time when India is grappling with the challenge of ensuring voter participation, free speech, and electoral independence while authoritarianism is on the rise. During Modi's second term, Freedom House downgraded India's democracy rating from “free” to “partly free” because of the government's discriminatory policies against Muslims, as well as its targeting of critics and the media. —ASTHA RAJVANSHI

