

Why India's big election stretches for 44 days



■ An art student gets her face painted with the Indian flag and a message reading, 'Vote for the Nation.'
AFP

NEARLY 969 MILLION PEOPLE REGISTERED TO VOTE IN LOK SABHA POLLS AT OVER A MILLION POLLING STATIONS

DUBAI
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The world's biggest election will begin in India tomorrow when nearly a billion eligible voters cast their ballot to decide who will fill the 543 seats of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament.

From April 19 to June 1, 969 million Indians – the combined population of the European Union or over 10 per cent of the global population – will vote in the general elections through electronic voting machines.

The exercise is the biggest anywhere in the world and will take place over 44 days. Results will be announced on June 4.

Why does it take so long?

The sheer size of India and the level of logistics needed to ensure that every registered voter is able to cast the ballot means polling is spread out across many weeks.

It took nearly four months to complete the vote in India's first elections in 1951-1952, after it gained independence from British rule, but just four days in 1980.

This year's election is the second longest. Of the 969 million registered voters, 497 million are men and 471 million women.

When will voting take place?

India's 28 states and eight union territories will vote at different times in seven phases – on April 19, April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1.

While some states will cast their ballots in a day, voting elsewhere may take longer. Uttar Pradesh, the largest state which is the size of Brazil with 200 million people, will vote on all seven days.

The staggered polling enables India's election commission to deploy security personnel who ensure the safety of electoral officials transporting the machines.

Who is eligible to vote?

All Indian citizens aged 18 and above are eligible to vote. Turnout during the last elections was more than 67 per cent, with nearly 615 million people voting.

Who is eligible to contest?

To be a member of the Lok Sabha a person must be a citizen



Reuters

■ An elderly man during home voting for senior citizens, ahead of the first phase of India's election, in Assam yesterday.

In 2019, poll officers trekked more than 480km for four days so that a single voter in a hamlet in Arunachal Pradesh could exercise his franchise.

543

seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament; **272 seats needed for a majority to form government**

\$14.2b

projected election spending for the current election cycle; \$8.7 billion was spent in 2019

of India and at least 25 years old.

When will results be out?

Votes will be counted on June 4 and results should be announced the same day.

Who forms the government?

India has a multiparty parliamentary system with a bicameral legislature. Voters cast a vote for a single candidate in a constituency and the candidate with the most votes wins the seat.

The party with a simple majority of 272 or more seats in the Lok Sabha is invited to form the government. If no single party reaches that mark, the president will ask the biggest party to try to put together a coalition.

Is the PM elected?

The President appoints the leader of the party that secures a majority in the Lok Sabha.

What are the main blocs fighting the polls?

There are 2,660 political parties in India. The election pits two-term Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP and its regional allies against an alliance of two dozen parties, led by Congress called INDIA or the Indian Na-

INDIA'S GEN Z VOTERS SEEK JOBS, HARMONY

For 20-year-old Roushan Kumar, who sells flowers for a living in India's eastern state of West Bengal, more jobs and better education are priorities. And the first-time voter wants to pick a government that will provide just that.

India's election starting tomorrow is the world's largest electoral exercise with more than 18 million people voting for the first time.

While polls project Prime Minister Narendra Modi will win a third term, new voters like Kumar are determined to make their voices count. "I will vote for a party that works for development in education. I will vote for a party that will provide employment so that there are jobs," Kumar, a Modi supporter, told Reuters.

Kumar's priorities match many his age. Rising tensions between religious groups, inflation and lack of jobs were the top concerns emerging from Modi's decade-long rule, according to a survey of 1,290 first-time voters in New Delhi by pollsters CSDS-Lokniti.

Nearly two-thirds of those polled said they would vote for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party given the government's strong record of economic growth.

Akansha Majumdar, a 20-year-old engineering student in West Bengal, said India's government needs to eradicate illiteracy and provide job security.

To tap into such disenchantment, India's main opposition Congress has promised paid apprenticeships. Modi's party manifesto also focuses on creating jobs.

Beyond jobs and rising costs, communal harmony is another priority for many young voters.

—Reuters



tional Developmental Inclusive Alliance. A victory would make Modi, 73, only the second prime minister after Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, to win a third straight term.

Independent candidates are also contesting the elections.

Do the states have equal number of seats?

Each state is allotted seats in the Lok Sabha such that the ratio between that number and its population is as close to uniform as possible. This does not apply to states having a population of less than 6 million. So, some states have more seats than others because of larger populations.

Who oversees the polls?

The Election Commission

of India oversees the vote and makes sure there is a voting booth available within 2 kilometres of every voter. There are 1.2 million polling stations in India.

In 2019, a team of polling officers trekked more than 480 kilometres for four days so that a single voter in a hamlet in the remote state of Arunachal Pradesh could exercise the right to vote.

How much does it cost?

About \$8.7 billion was spent in 2019, according to the Centre for Media Studies. It forecast that election spending would exceed \$14.2 billion this year, almost on par with spending during the 2020 congressional and presidential elections in the US.

— With inputs from agencies