

# What Do Bihar's Voters Want?

Notes from the Field

WORKING  
PAPER

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## Introduction

From this week, voters will queue up for the final three phases of the five-phase election in Bihar, choosing either the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) or the Janata Dal (United)-Rashtriya Janata Dal-Congress “Grand Alliance” (mahagathbandhan). Over the past few weeks, we have been traveling extensively across Bihar to get a sense of how voters are making up their minds, focusing on constituencies that went to the polls in the first two phases of this election. A spate of contradictory opinion polls and an aggressive campaign between bitter foes, Nitish Kumar and Narendra Modi, and bonhomie between once bitter foes, Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav, have only served to confuse the situation further in Bihar. No one knows how it will all shake out.



This has all the makings of political suspense film, and, at times, it feels as if everyone in Bihar is in on the script. At a roadside teashop in Jehanabad district, we met a man who argued his case with precision, full of emotion with perfect inflection and timing. A bystander whispered to one of us, “He’s really good, isn’t he? He’s already been on television.” We quickly realised that unless we moved away from the main roads, well-trod by journalists and researchers, we would only hear well-rehearsed sound bytes instead of the concerns of the average Bihar voter.

Even in more isolated villages, we observed that voters often displayed sophisticated and well-reasoned political preferences. No one we met was making up his or her mind based upon a single comment by Lalu or Bhagwat, or a promise by Nitish or Modi. As researchers and analysts, it is in our nature to read too much into each comment, each twist and turn of the campaign, when voters themselves make decisions in a more holistic way. Our conversations convinced us that our efforts would best be put to use by characterising the larger narratives and debates that impact voters’ choices.

## Key Questions

In our last piece, we showed that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the NDA were ahead of the present Grand Alliance, now comprised of Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)], Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress, in 2014. The Bihar election should not be seen in simple incumbency/anti-incumbency terms. Nitish Kumar, from JD(U), is the incumbent chief minister, but the dissolution of the JD(U)-BJP alliance and the subsequent “Modi wave” have provided a structural break from politics as usual. The Grand Alliance must actually win voters back to win in this election. In many ways, Narendra Modi is the incumbent.

The election will ultimately be decided by the answers to the following questions: *Are there enough voters who voted for NDA in 2014 that will switch to the Grand Alliance this time to swing the election in the Grand Alliance's favor? Who are they? And what issues are most important to them?*

## A Debate over the Meaning of *Vikas*

Virtually each person we talked to said they would vote the party that would “do more work” and that they want *vikas* (progress/development). This demand for *vikas* is often viewed as a politically correct answer and summarily ignored by many analysts. Yet, with continued discussions, we found discernible patterns in what voters mean when they demand *vikas*.

Nitish Kumar's model of *vikas*, implemented when he became chief minister in 2005, emphasised rapidly increasing the size of the state, from public works, to schools, to a number of benefit schemes. As we traveled through the districts of Jehanabad, Arwal, and Gaya, wandering off the beaten path often left us in remote locations. In one village, we ran into three elderly women chatting with each other from their respective doorsteps in a cluster of ramshackle homes. Unlike some others, they were more than willing to share their opinions. They had a keen sense of what was going on around them in the village (they were clearly keeping tabs on where we were through the entire visit) and were certain in their political opinions. When asked whom they were voting for, one woman quickly replied, “Of course I will vote for Nitish. I am getting an old age pension because of him.”



In another village, we began speaking with a middle-aged couple, but they only gave us guarded answers thinking us to be party workers. After all, journalists or researchers rarely ever make it out this far. At first, their twenty-something daughter stood about 5-6 metres away, questioning our motives for showing up in her village, but listening to our every word. After ten minutes, satisfied with our explanation, she walked over and took control of the conversation. She was a second-year history student attending a local private college. She had received a free bicycle and a scholarship from Nitish's government; the scholarship made attending college essentially free. Yet, she was heavily critical of Nitish for failing to generate investment and create jobs and would be supporting the NDA this time. We pushed her to explain her position. Nitish had given her so much, even if he wasn't able to generate jobs. “What else matters?” she said firmly.

These two experiences illustrate the two very different interpretations of *vikas* among voters. Virtually everyone we met lauded Nitish for improving law and order and building roads. The point of debate among voters is about how the role of the government is envisioned. Nitish's notion of *vikas* is predicated upon increasing social protection by expanding the state in terms of investment and benefits given. According to fiscal year 2013-2014 Reserve Bank of India (RBI) estimates, Bihar is the only State in which the sum of development expenditure, social sector expenditure, and capital outlays was more than 40 per cent of the gross state domestic product (GSDP), compared to an average of 23.7 per cent across non-special category States in India. At the same time, recent estimates paint Bihar as a laggard in terms of jobs. According to Economic Census data for 2009-2010, there is a 73 per cent and 20 per cent unemployment rate in urban and rural Bihar, respectively, compared to 34 per cent and 16 per cent across India.

Modi's notion of *vikas*, by contrast, includes promises of private investment and job creation instead of personal benefits, which particularly appeals to a class of "aspirational" voters in Bihar that aim to be a part of the rapid urbanisation and economic growth that India has seen over the past couple of decades (Bihar is India's second least urbanised state, with only 11.3% of its population living in urban areas according to the 2011 Census). The recent price rise in pulses may have taken off some of the luster in Modi's image in managing the economy. There are also concerns about his ability to deliver on his promises, based on performance since 2014. At a roadside grocery shop in Jehanabad district, we met a middle-aged man who had voted for BJP in 2014, who complained, "Modi has said many things. But what has he done so far?" A bystander, who had also supported BJP in 2014, responded, "He promised to bring back black money and give 15 lakh to each person. We opened Jan Dhan accounts, but we haven't received anything yet."

NDA's recent problems on the campaign trail have been well documented. Leaders associated with the NDA have made issues out of eating beef and caste reservations. While polarising the electorate further, these comments have particularly hurt the NDA because they have taken the coalition away from the message of *vikas*. This has drawn the NDA into conflict with Lalu, who has built a narrative of a fight between forward castes and backward castes in this election, while Nitish has focused on projecting himself as a man of *vikas* without much counterbalance. At the same time, we found Modi's notion of *vikas* very popular with voters under the age of 30. Given that voters under the age of 30 make up more than a quarter of the electorate, they may still swing the election in NDA's favor.

In sum, the issue of *vikas* is likely to have a disproportionate impact on undecided voters in this election. The coalition that wins the debate over the meaning of *vikas* is also likely to win the election.

## Caste and the "Floating Vote"

In our last piece, we also demonstrated that the relationship of caste-party alliances to electoral outcomes is complicated. At the same time, there is no doubt that caste weighs heavily on the minds of many voters. Most people we met could give estimates of the relative size of each *jati* in their constituencies and had some sense of the coalition towards which each of these caste groups was leaning. While the veracity of these estimates can be questioned, the fact that so many voters were able to provide such details speaks volumes about the depth of caste politics in Bihar. Yet, further conversations made clear the complexity of how caste identity translates into a vote for one coalition or the other.

We met our fair share of Yadav voters who would be voting for the Grand Alliance this time due to their traditional support for Lalu, but we also met a lot of Yadavs who bucked this pattern. In a village in Samastipur district, we happened upon three Yadav men resting at home, out of the afternoon sun, who spoke in unequivocal terms about their support for the Grand Alliance. One of them said, "Lalu made a lot of promises, but he didn't deliver on them. Nitish also made a lot of promises, but he delivered." Their support for the Grand Alliance wasn't because of Lalu, it was because of Nitish. Also in Samastipur district, we met a young twenty-something man in a faded saffron-colored "bol bam" t-shirt at a tea shop. He spoke passionately about the poor quality of schools in Bihar and the need for economic development; he would be supporting NDA this time as he had in 2014. In Jehanabad district, we talked to a group of 20-25 Yadav males, ranging from teenagers to the elderly. All but one of them would vote for the Grand Alliance this time, even though they had all supported Modi in 2014. Some of these men were such strong supporters of the BJP in 2014 that they engaged in fundraising activities for the party, but all were disappointed with Modi's performance on the economy and development to date. Recently, the NDA has shifted tack from attacking Lalu because it fears that such attacks are leading to a consolidation of the Yadav vote for the Grand Alliance. Our own fieldwork suggests that even if Yadav consolidation for the Grand Alliance is taking place, the reasons are far more complicated than just support for Lalu.

When Jitan Ram Manjhi left JD(U), started his own party (HAM), and joined hands with the NDA, there was an open question about the extent to which Manjhi could consolidate the "Mahadalit" vote, a group for which he claims to be a leader. The Mahadalits are a mishmash of Dalit groups (essentially everyone but the Paswans), and to get some sense of Manjhi's ability to mobilise this vote as a fixed bloc, we sought out Mahadalit voters in Manjhi's home region of Jehanabad district. Nitish had also focused significant infrastructure efforts in Jehanabad district, so there are reasons for split loyalties. We definitely observed a "Manjhi factor," but it is largely concentrated in his own Musahar community. We spoke to a group of around ten young Pasi men, sitting roadside, who had supported Modi in 2014. They were disappointed with Modi's ability to handle the economy, with one young man mentioning, "If Modi wins, everything will become very expensive." Further conversations revealed that the Pasis, also a Mahadalit community, were fairly evenly split between the two coalitions. Overall, we observed significant divisions in support among non-Paswan and non-Musahar Dalit communities, suggesting that Mahadalits are anything but a fixed vote bank.

When caste groups may split their votes across coalitions in the manner described above, the outcome of the election becomes difficult to predict. Some simple arithmetic will help clarify the point. Consider the caste groupings of Yadavs, Mahadalits, and “extremely backward castes” or EBCs. These are all groups for which both coalitions are aggressively vying for votes, and, if hearsay is to be believed, taken together they constitute over 50 per cent (if not 60 per cent) of the electorate. Even just an 8 per cent shift in these groups towards one coalition would yield a 4-5 per cent shift in the entire electorate, more than enough to swing the election in one coalition's favour in this close fight.

Such small shifts in a caste group can rarely be picked up in conversations or even surveys, given data quality and margins of error. Simply characterising whether levels of support among caste groups for a coalition are low, medium or high does not provide an adequate picture for election analysis. The Yadavs likely have a high level of support for the Grand Alliance, and will still have a high level of support if 8 per cent of its voters shift towards NDA, even if this has large implications for the final election outcome.

The reality is that most caste groups have a significant “floating vote,” which is more than large enough to swing the election. An upper caste person and a Yadav who vote purely on caste interests will always vote for the NDA and the Grand Alliance, respectively; they are fixed voters, and have already been factored into calculations by party strategists at the time of candidate selection. The “floating vote,” which cares less about narrow caste concerns, and probably more about *vikas*, can be convinced during the campaign and is the population that will ultimately decide this election.

## Phase-Wise Data and Implications for the Election

In our previous piece, we counted that the NDA had won 172 out of 243 assembly constituency (ACs) segments in the 2014 national election. When we parse these results by the election phase in which the ACs will vote, we can develop a better understanding of some of the dynamics of the entire electoral campaign.

The five-phase election calendar in Bihar has a peculiar structure. There is a nearly two-week gap between the second and third phases of the election due to *Durga Puja*. The gap is a crucial point in the campaign, as parties have tried to generate “*hawa*” (momentum) off of perceived performance in the first two phases because “bandwagon effects,” the act of voting for the party one thinks will win, are quite high in India.

When we look at the data, we find that the strongholds for the NDA are clustered in phases two, three, and four. Given what we have seen, it seems certain that NDA will have to perform well in phases three and four if it is to win in this election, but the data suggest this is quite possible.

Between the first two phases, 81 constituencies have already voted, 49 in the first phase and 32 in the second phase. In 2014, the NDA won 36 out of 49 phase 1 constituencies (73 per cent), while it won 29 out of 32 phase 2 constituencies (91 per cent). In the previous piece, we characterised safer “landslide seats” for the NDA by calculating ACs in which NDA had greater vote share than the combined vote share of JD(U) and the former UPA (Congress and RJD) in 2014, i.e., those constituencies the NDA would have won even if the Grand Alliance fielded two candidates. Of the 36 phase 1 constituencies the NDA won, it won in such a landslide fashion over the Grand Alliance in only 6 constituencies, and of the 29 phase 2 constituencies the NDA won, it won in such a landslide fashion over the Grand Alliance in 11 constituencies. Taken together, these data paint a picture of the NDA in a significantly weaker position in phase 1 as compared to phase 2 constituencies. A relatively low number of landslide seats for the NDA in these phases imply that it was vulnerable to losing many seats simply through consolidation of the non-NDA vote in the Grand Alliance.

In 2014, the NDA won 107 out of the remaining 162 constituencies remaining in the final three phases of this election. The NDA won 37 out of 50 phase 3 constituencies (74 per cent), and 53 out of 55 phase 4 constituencies (96 per cent), in 2014. The NDA had a very high rate of landslide wins in phase 3 and phase 4 constituencies. Of the 37 phase 3 constituencies and 53 phase 4 constituencies the NDA won in 2014, it won 23 and 37 seats by landslide, respectively. In short, the next two phases constitute the NDA's strongest electoral base in Bihar. Phase 5 contains the Seemanchal region with large Muslim populations, and the NDA is unlikely to do well there; even in 2014, it only won in 28 per cent of the phase 5 constituencies. The phase 3 constituencies cover Patna and the areas around it, and are thought to be areas of NDA strength. The constituencies in phase 4, covering Western Bihar, have not always been thought of as NDA strongholds despite the sweep in 2014, and one would expect Lalu to be a stronger force in this region this time, but the extent to which the NDA keeps a grip on these areas may decide the election.

In 2014, the NDA won 65 of 81 phase 1 and phase 2 constituencies. Even optimistic estimates by State BJP leader Sushil Modi put the NDA seat total in the first two phases only at 50-55 seats. Internally, we hear, the NDA is actually predicting significantly fewer seats than that number. Given that the NDA won 172 ACs in 2014, it may lose 50 ACs as compared to 2014 and still form the government. Even with a large 50-seat cushion, if the NDA continues lose ACs at the predicted rate for phases 1 and 2, it will likely lose the election. On the other hand, looking at the data, the NDA was more vulnerable in phase 1 and phase 2 constituencies and is in a stronger position in phase 3 and 4 constituencies, so we might expect the NDA to hold on to seats at a higher rate in the next two phases. Thus, the data are far too uncertain in this close election to make clear predictions about who will win.



## Concluding Thoughts

After the 2014 national election, the NDA held a sizeable lead over the Grand Alliance in Bihar, but this lead seems to have narrowed, if not evaporated, after the first two phases of the election. Ultimately, the election will turn on how many voters supported the NDA in 2014 and will switch to the Grand Alliance this time. Although it is not possible to get a sense of scale, we met quite a few voters who fit this profile. For all of the noise around the election, about caste, beef and reservation, each person we met who had switched to the Grand Alliance did so because they were effectively convinced that Nitish would be better for *vikas* than Modi. In an election this close, aggregate caste calculus does little to predict outcomes. This election will be decided by a large swathe of floating voters, who are most likely to be swayed by a convincing argument about *vikas*, and, the election will likely turn on whether Nitish or Modi provides a more persuasive notion of *vikas*.

After a disjointed start, the NDA has retooled its strategy with some introspection and focused their approach. It remains to be seen if the NDA strategists responded to flaws in their campaign strategy in time. On October 25th, Modi returned to Bihar for a series of rallies, unveiling a new campaign approach for the NDA. A major focus of the rally was to attack Nitish and Lalu for failing to create jobs for the State, and forcing Bihari youth to migrate. While Modi has promised development in Bihar, his previously unveiled 1.25 lakh crore development package for Bihar was almost completely geared towards infrastructure investment. Unlike Nitish, who has promised loans and cash allowances for youth, and reservations for women, Modi has not directly promised benefits, even in his new six-point plan for Bihar. The campaigns are clearly narrowing in on the *vikas* debate.



On October 25th, just two hours after Modi left the Hajipur rally in a helicopter, Nitish landed in Hajipur for a counter-rally in a helicopter of his own. While Modi had attacked Nitish (and Lalu) for ruining the economic environment in Bihar, Nitish hit back that Modi was unable to contain inflation and unwilling to give tax concessions to Bihar. This has become a campaign of theatrics, direct confrontation, point and counterpoint. As the campaign moves towards its crescendo, we are all watching with rapt attention; no one can guess how this film ends.