

The Modi Factor in the 2019 Lok Sabha Election: How Critical Was It to the BJP Victory?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/inp**Sandeep Shastri¹**

Abstract

The BJP victory in the 2019 elections is attributed to a range of factors. This article examines the role of the leadership factor in propelling the BJP to victory in this election. While the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP/NDA was clearly the preferred choice, the National Election Study 2019, undertaken by Lokniti–CSDS, indicates that one-thirds of those who supported the BJP would have altered their voting preference if Modi were not to be the Prime Ministerial candidate of the party. The article explores the leadership factor in the 2019 election and concludes that it was a major factor that influenced voter choice.

Keywords

Leadership, Modi, presidential style, national election, pull factor

Introducing the Theme

Ever since the trends of the results of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections became clear, the role of the leadership of Prime Minister Modi became a crucial point of discussion. How critical was Modi's leadership to the victory of the BJP? Was this election essentially an endorsement of the leadership of the incumbent Prime Minister? Were the BJP and Narendra Modi successful in converting the electoral race of 2019 into a referendum on the leadership choices offered by different political parties? It is becoming increasingly clear that Modi's leadership was beyond doubt a major factor that accounted for the success of the BJP in particular and the NDA in general. This article draws from the CSDS–Lokniti National Election Study 2019 data to draw certain inferences on the impact of the leadership factor in the just concluded Lok Sabha elections.

There is today an emerging body of literature that examines the impact of the leadership in elections in parliamentary forms of government (Balmas, Rahat, Sheaffer, & Shenhav, 2014; Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010; Bean 1993; Bean & Mughan, 1989; Carter, 2015; Dowding, 2013; Harmel & Svasand 1993; Heffernan, 2013; Hennessy, 2000, 2007; Kavanagh, 1990, 2000; King, 1985, 2002; Kriesi, 2011; Langer,

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2007, 2010; McAllister, 2011; Richards, 2009; Shastri, 2009; Seymour-Ure, 2003). The attempt to term leadership driven parliamentary elections as 'Presidential style' races has been questioned on the ground that the dynamics of parliamentary polls are distinctly different from presidential ones. The preference is for the use of 'prime-ministerialization' of parliamentary elections (Dowding, 2013; Heffernan, 2013). The 'increasing focus on the Prime Minister', has been highlighted by several studies (Bean & Mughan, 1989; also Carter, 2015). The 'personalization and centralization of power' in the Prime Minister have clearly contributed to this trend (Dowding, 2013, pp. 617–618) and often the Prime Minister is not just 'preeminent (but) can become predominant' (Heffernan, 2013, pp. 644–645). Writings have focussed attention on how many successful electoral campaigns have been fashioned on a 'personal rather than a party reputation' (Carey & Shugart, 1995, p. 417). Studies of party and regime change have argued that 'new leaders' could often make the decisive difference (Harmel, Heo, Tan, & Janda, 1995, p. 1; also Harmel & Svasland, 1993; Kriesi, 2011). The 'prominent tone of the media' in projecting candidate attributes in an election and driving voter evaluation has also been the focus of recent research (Balmas & Shaefer, 2010, p. 204; Seymour-Ure, 2003). Studies have stressed that 'performance relevant qualities of competence and integrity' play critical role in leadership-based electoral decisions in parliamentary systems (Balmas et.al., 2014; also Bean, 1993, p. 132).

In the specific Indian context, it has been pointed out that cultural and institutional factors could account for leadership playing a key role in influencing electoral outcomes (Chhibber & Ostermann, 2014; also Chhibber & Verma, 2014). The importance of a strong leader who can be decisive and swift in decision-making was underscored by common people in India as revealed in the State of Democracy in South Asia Reports (SDSA, 2008, 2017). The role of leadership has been vital in recent national elections (Jafferlot, 2015; Shastri, 2009; Shastri & Syal, 2017). In the past too, right from Independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to Indira Gandhi and later Rajiv Gandhi leaders from the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty have played a pivotal role in national politics. It is also important to note that prime ministers who had short tenures or were from outside the Nehru–Gandhi family did leave a mark as leaders. These include Lal Bahadur Shastri, Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh (Shastri, 2019b). Even prominent non-Congress leaders who went on to become prime ministers like Atal Bihar Vajpayee, Morarji Desai and V. P. Singh left an important impact on the course of politics during their leadership. The role of the leadership factor in defining and determining electoral outcomes has thus been the focus of considerable academic attention.

Contextualizing the 2019 Elections

Any assessment of the election campaign in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections invariably draws comparison with 2014 when the BJP, for the first time, won a majority on its own and was led by its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. While this comparison is extremely tempting, a few issues need to be budgeted in such an analysis, especially when seen from the prism of leadership. In 2014, the BJP had the benefit of strong anti-incumbency sentiment against the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The BJP had declared Narendra Modi as their prime ministerial candidate well before the elections. This worked to their decisive advantage, especially when the UPA was being led by a prime minister who had publicly declared that he was retiring from office even if the UPA led by the Congress had a chance of returning to power (Shastri & Syal, 2017). This time around the BJP under Modi had to defend its record as a ruling party. This clearly led to a change of tactics. Compared to 2014, the 2019 election campaign of Narendra Modi was much shorter. It commenced with a rally at Meerut in Uttar

Pradesh on 28 March 2019 and concluded on 17 May 2019 with a rally in Khargone in Madhya Pradesh. During these 7 weeks, Modi addressed 142 rallies and conducted four road shows (*The Economic Times*, 2019, May 22). In 2014, Modi's campaign lasted for well over 8 months (from September 2013 to May 2014) and involved 437 rallies. In 2019, Modi covered all the 29 states in the country.

Nature of the Election Campaign

In 2019, Modi's campaign managers had a clearly worked out strategy. There was a clear focus on Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of the country. The Prime Minister addressed the maximum number of rallies in this state. Doing well in Uttar Pradesh was critical to the BJP's agenda of securing a majority on its own. To make up for a possible deficit in North and Central India (as compared to 2014), the Prime Minister also focussed greater attention on two critical states of Eastern India—West Bengal and Odisha (*Deccan Herald*, 2019, May 19). With powerful state-based parties in power in these states, the BJP hoped to emerge as the key challenger and improve on its past performance in these two states.

Having to defend its record in power, the Prime Minister's campaign in 2019 was distinctly different. There was no UPA in power whose track record in governance could be challenged. There was a conscious attempt to steer clear from the promises made by the BJP in 2014. If development was the focus of Modi's speeches in 2014, it shifted to national security in 2019. Taking full advantage of the strong public mood created after the Pulwama attacks and the 'surgical strikes' in Balakot, the Prime Minister focussed attention on his government's efforts to defend India's territorial integrity adding a tinge of nationalism and patriotism to the appeal. This factor was used as the launch pad for the slogan '*Phir Ek Bar, Modi Sarkar*' (once again, a Modi government). A well-choreographed campaign by the BJP that skilfully used the Pulwama attacks and the Balakot strikes to their advantage and helped in projecting the Prime Minister as being decisive, resolute and firm in decision-making.

Second, an alternate route (as compared to 2014) was used to attack the Congress and other political opponents of the BJP. In 2014, Modi had a readily available campaign issue—the non-performance of UPA II under the leadership of the Congress. This time around, the Prime Minister focussed on attacking the Congress President Rahul Gandhi and the 'role of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty' in Congress politics. His task was made much easier by the Congress President Rahul Gandhi, who launched a sustained attack on the Prime Minister throughout the campaign. Rahul Gandhi's '*Chowkidar Chor Hai*' (The watchman is a Thief—Modi had referred to himself at the start of his time as the Head Watchman of the country) jibe, appeared to have back fired for two reasons. First, the BJP and more specifically Prime Minister Modi, pushed the Congress (and its leadership) on the back-foot by redirecting the '*Chowkidar*' campaign to '*Main Bhi Chowkidar*' (I am also a watchman) and turning it to their decisive advantage. The CSDS–Lokniti National Election Study data indicate that close to half of those who had heard of the '*Chowkidar Chor Hai*' slogan had actually voted for the NDA and only one-fourth had voted for parties in the UPA. Second, by focussing on the Prime Minister, the Congress President worked to the advantage of the BJP by making the campaign about leadership and not about policies and issues.

In his campaign, the Prime Minister did not merely target the Congress leadership but also focussed attention on important leaders of state-based parties. Mention was made earlier of the fact that he addressed an exceptionally greater number of rallies in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Odisha. In Uttar Pradesh, he attacked the leaders of the Grand Alliance—Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati, in West Bengal he targeted Mamata Banerjee and in Odisha he was critical of the leadership of Naveen Patnaik. In his campaign across the nation, Modi was critical of the opposition alliance as being opportunistic and

constantly reminded voters of the past experiences with coalition governments. He often referred to the *Mahagathbandhan* (grand alliance) as a *Maha Milawat* (grand adulterated mix)

It must also be stressed that the projection of the Prime Ministers campaign in the media was closely monitored and even choreographed by his team in a manner that worked to his advantage. The unprecedented coverage that the Prime Minister received in both the print and electronic media did play a major role in ensuring his greater and positive visibility throughout the campaign.

An Attempted Course Correction?

Once the election results were announced, Modi highlighted two factors which he felt contributed to the BJP and NDA victory. He spoke of people expressing a 'pro-incumbency' trust. He went on to add that the NDA was marked by 'energy and synergy', two chemicals 'which have made us strong and capable' (*The New Indian Express*, 2019, May 24). In a conciliatory tone, he went on to add that '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*' (Moving forward with everyone) would now include '*Sabka Vishwas*' (Gaining everyone's confidence). This was an important point that the Prime Minister seemed to have conceded. Second, he also unpackaged a new 'NARA' (slogan)—National Ambition with Regional Aspiration (*Deccan Herald*, 2019, May 24). This was possibly acknowledging that there were regions of India where the BJP had not been able to register a strong presence. While it seemed 'entrenched' in North, West and Central India and 'expanding' in East and North East India, support was still 'elusive' in much of South India. The leadership was clearly giving a call for minor course correction.

Seeking Votes in Modi's Name

The 2019 elections saw all the 437 BJP candidates in the election seeking votes on behalf of Narendra Modi and in order to secure for him a second term. Even the 106 candidates from the NDA allies of the BJP sought votes in the name of the Prime Minister. In that sense, Narendra Modi was central to the NDA campaign much more than in 2014. In 2014 the support was for a prime ministerial candidate. This time it was clearly for an incumbent prime minister. What further worked to the BJP's advantage was the fact that neither the UPA nor the state-based parties' alliance was able to project a leadership face. In fact, the DMK and towards the end of the campaign, the JDS acknowledged Rahul Gandhi as the prime ministerial face of the UPA, an endorsement that even the Congress party did not formally do (*Hindustan Times*, 2019, May 18; *The Times of India*, 2018, December 18). A visible leadership face proved to be a clear advantage for the BJP and the NDA.

The Leadership Factor in 2019

To attempt a more detailed assessment of the leadership factor in the 2019 polls, three sets of related data points are analyzed. First, how strong was the preference for Modi as Prime Minister and how far ahead was he of his rivals? Second, among BJP and NDA voters, would Narendra Modi not being the prime ministerial candidate of the alliance have made any difference? Finally, when asked to choose between party, candidate and prime minister, which was the most important factor influencing voting decision? The data flowing from the three sets of questions are analyzed keeping in mind a range of demographic factors to assess their relative impact.

Preference for Modi as Prime Minister

Close to half the respondents in the CSDS–Lokniti Post Poll Study (46%) stated that given a choice they would prefer Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. This was a clear 11 percentage point increase as compared to 2014. This also surpasses the support that Vajpayee got for Prime Ministership in 2004 (40%). Modi had a clear 24 percentage point lead over his nearest opponent (Rahul Gandhi) in the popular choice for Prime Minister (see Table 1). This lead had reduced to just 10 percentage points a year before the election after having peaked at 35 percentage points 3 years after the Modi government was in power. The Lokniti Mood of the Nation Poll of 2018 showed that in the fourth year of government, there were visible signs of anti-incumbency against the government and a decline in the support for the leadership of Modi (see Table 1).

Close to 9 of every 10 of the respondents, who said that they voted for the BJP, preferred Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. The percentage of support for Modi as Prime Minister among BJP voters has gone up by 8 percentage points as compared to 2014. It is evident that Modi benefitted from the ‘incumbent advantage’. It is also important to record that the support for Modi as Prime Minister was equally high among those who voted for the allies of the BJP in the NDA. Three-fourths of those who said that they voted for an ally supported Modi as Prime Minister. This too has increased substantially from six of every 10 in 2014. Close to one-fourth of those who supported Left parties preferred Modi as Prime Minister. This may well have to do with the specificities of the politics of West Bengal. Among supporters of state-based parties, three of every 10 backed Modi for Prime Ministership. Given that there was no formal anointment of a leader of a state-based party for Prime Ministership support for Narendra Modi could be explained in this context (see Table 2).

The impact of the ‘pull factor’ also needs to be stressed. Among the respondents who switched sides from Congress to the BJP (from 2014 to 2019), close to eight of every 10 (79%) preferred Narendra Modi over Rahul Gandhi. On the other hand, among respondents who moved from the BJP to the Congress (from 2014 to 2019) less than six of every 10 (56%) favoured Rahul Gandhi over Narendra Modi.

Table 1. Preference for Prime Minister: Narendra Modi’s Lead Over Rahul Gandhi—2014–2019 (in percentage points)

	April–May 2014	May 2017	Jan 2018	May 2018	March 2019	April–May 2019
All India	+20	+35	+17	+10	+19	+24

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

Question asked: After this election who would you prefer as the next Prime Minister of India? (*Do not offer any name, record exact answer*)

Table 2. Preference for Modi as Prime Minister Among Different Segments of Voters—from 2014 to 2019

	April–May 2014 (%)	April–May 2019 (%)
BJP voters	80	88
BJP allies’ voters	60	77
Cong voters	4	7
Cong allies’ voters	12	8
BSP and SP voters	8	11
Left voters	21	23
Others’ voters	16	28

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

Question asked: After this election who would you prefer as the next Prime Minister of India? (*Do not offer any name, record exact answer*)

Are there any major demographic differences in support for Modi as Prime Minister? The Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study data point out to important differences in the level and intensity of support for Modi as Prime Minister across different socio-economic groups and regions of the country.

The support for Modi as Prime Minister was much higher among the younger respondents. More than half of those in the 18–25 age group preferred Modi to be the Prime Minister. As the age of the respondents increases, the intensity of this support drops. Among the oldest age segment (above 56 years), the support is the lowest—just a little above four of every 10 respondents. The younger generation of voters invested much more hope in Modi as compared to the older age groups.

Access to education also impacted on support for Modi as Prime Minister. Those who had the benefit of college education were the group that was most likely to support Modi to lead the country. The numbers decline as we move towards the respondents with lesser access to education and are the lowest among the illiterates. The same trend is true for media exposure. The greater the media exposure of the respondents, the more likely they were to want Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. A majority of the respondents with high media exposure favoured Modi to lead the country.

If the caste calculus were to be considered, the highest support for Modi as Prime Minister is seen in the Upper Castes. Close to two-thirds of the Upper Caste respondents wished to see Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister again. More than half of the OBC respondents took a similar stand. This support dips to less than half, among the Scheduled Castes and is the least among the Muslims. Just one in every 10 Muslim respondents favoured Modi as Prime Minister. Two points merit attention in this regard. First, as compared to 2014, there is a 4 percentage point rise in support among Muslims for Modi as the preferred Prime Minister choice. Second, the Prime Minister's focus on '*Sabka Vishwas*' (Winning everyone's confidence), in his first speech after the BJP victory in the elections, is essentially an effort to reach out to this segment of society.

The endorsement of Narendra Modi for Prime Ministership also has a clear class divide. The richer segments among the respondents were much more enthusiastic to back Modi for Prime Ministership as compared to the economically disadvantaged. There is a clear 9 percentage point gap in support for Modi as Prime Minister between the rich and poor respondents.

A binary logistic regression analysis was done to see the impact of access to education, age cohorts, economic class, caste or communities' of voters and level of media exposure on voters' preference for Modi as Prime Minister (see Table 3). Respondents who were illiterate or completed only primary education were less likely to prefer Narendra Modi as a Prime Minister as compared to those having access to college education. The impact of age was also discernible in respondents preferring Modi as Prime Minister. The odds of voters between the age group of 18–25 years old preferring Modi as PM were 1.404 times greater than the odds of voters who were in the age group of 56 years and above. The regression results also indicated that younger voters as compared to voters aged 56 years and above were more likely to preference as PM. Importantly, the result in each age group was statistically significant.

The economic class of the voters and preference for Modi as Prime Minister did not yield statically significant results, in the presence of other socio-demographic factors, except for voters from the lower economic class. They were less likely to prefer Modi as PM as compared to upper class voters. Caste/community of voters was also an important driver of preference for Modi as Prime Minister. Compared to other religious minorities, the Hindu Upper-Caste voters were more likely to prefer Modi. The odds of Upper Castes preferring Modi as Prime Minister were 6.645 times greater than other religious minorities, in the presence of other socio-economic variables. Nonetheless, voters from OBCs and Scheduled Tribes had also preferred Modi over other leaders as compared to other religious minorities. Compared to other Hindu caste groups, the odds of Dalits supporting Narendra Modi as Prime Minister were lower, but greater than other religious minorities. Muslims compared to other religious minorities, were less likely to prefer Modi as PM. When one looked at the role of media exposure in preferring Modi as Prime

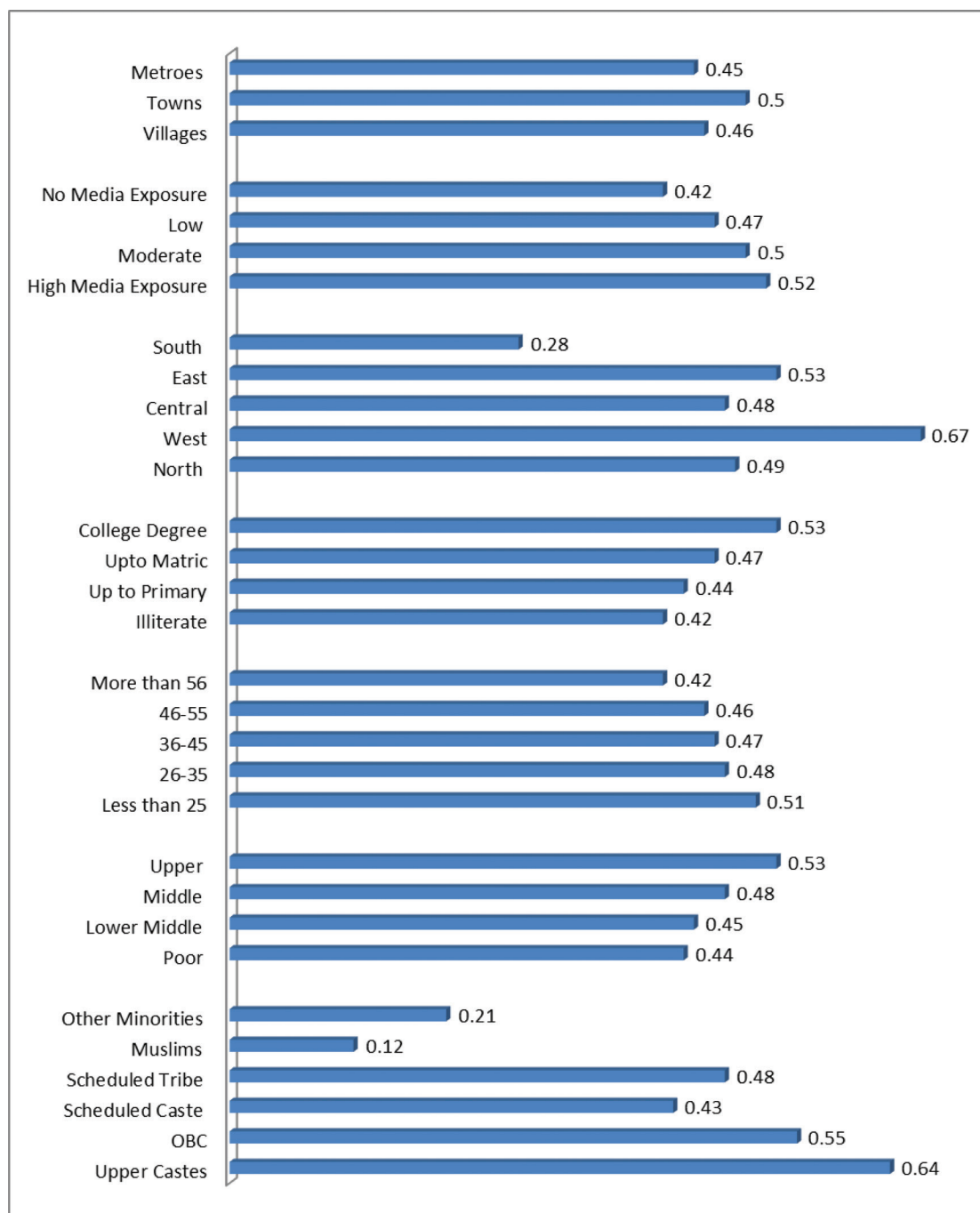


Figure 1. Predicted Probability for Modi as Prime Minister

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

Question asked: After this election who would you prefer as the next Prime Minister of India? (Do not offer any name, record exact answer)

Table 3. Preference for Modi as Prime Minister

	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)
Level of education: Reference category graduation and above			10.526**	
Non-literate	-0.162***	0.051	10.006	0.851
Primary	-0.111**	0.048	5.291	0.895
Matric pass	-0.059	0.041	2.067	0.943
Age groups: reference category 56 years and above			45.351***	
18–25 years	0.339***	0.056	36.616	1.404
26–35 years	0.246***	0.046	28.788	1.279
36–45 years	0.218***	0.045	22.989	1.243
46–55 years	0.129***	0.047	7.383	1.137
Economic class: reference category upper class			9.928**	
Poor	-0.037	0.051	0.513	0.964
Lower	-0.127**	0.048	6.901	0.881
Middle	-0.074	0.050	2.148	0.929
Caste/communities			2085.526***	
Upper Castes	1.894***	0.083	523.504	6.645
OBCs	1.554***	0.081	370.485	4.729
Scheduled Castes	1.075***	0.086	157.943	2.929
Scheduled Tribes	1.266***	0.092	189.645	3.547
Muslims	-0.616***	0.094	42.602	0.540
Level of Media exposure: reference category high exposure			2.278	
No exposure	-0.074	0.068	1.162	0.929
Low exposure	-0.018	0.061	0.089	0.982
Moderate exposure	-0.018	0.062	0.080	0.983
Constant	-1.334	0.105	162.113	0.263

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

Note: *** 0.000, ** >0.000 but < 0.01.

Minister, there was no statistically significant relationship. Through this analysis, it is possible to infer that factors such as caste, age and level of education had a role in shaping voters' preference for Modi as Prime Minister, while the presence of the other variables like level of media exposure and economic class were not statistically significant.

If one were to look at place of residence of the respondents, the highest support for Modi as Prime Minister was in the towns and cities with a slight drop in support among those living in villages and metropolitan areas. This endorses the view long held that the town and cities of India are at the 'cusp of change' (DeSouza, Kumar & Shastri, 2009).

There are clear differences across the regions in support for Modi as the Prime Minister. This is clearly in tune with the pattern of voting that was seen in the elections also. The support for Modi as Prime Minister was the highest in Western India followed by the East, North and Central India. Modi received the least support in the South of the country. This is in consonance with the seats that the BJP won in the different regions of the country. In the East of India, given the presence of two powerful state-based parties (in West Bengal and Odisha) neither of whose leaders was in the reckoning for Prime Ministership, Modi appears to have garnered support in this region even from those who did not support the BJP.

The impact of the leadership factor can also be gauged from the support Modi received in different types of electoral competitions. In states where there was a bi-polar contest between the BJP and its key rival (in that state) close to 60 per cent of the respondents favoured Modi as the Prime Minister. In other

states, a little over 66 per cent of the respondents favoured Modi to lead the country. In the Hindi heartland over half the respondents (53%) favoured Modi as Prime Minister. This drops by 12 percentage points (41%) in the rest of the country.

Impact of Modi as Prime Ministerial Candidate of the BJP/NDA

The Post Poll survey also directly sought to tap the impact of the leadership factor in voting choice. Respondents were asked if they would continue to vote for the party they chose even if Narendra Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP/NDA. Among those who said they would vote for the BJP, close to one-third (32%) said that their voting preference would have changed if Modi were not to be the prime ministerial candidate. This marks a 5 percentage point increase compared to the 2014 Post Poll Survey. In the case of those respondents who said that they voted for the NDA allies of the BJP, one-fourth of them indicated that they would not have voted for this ally if the NDA Prime Ministerial candidate was different. Thus even as the intensity of support for the Prime Minister is much less among the voters of the NDA allies than among the BJP voters, it is higher than what was indicated by non BJP NDA voters in 2014, by 4 percentage points. Thus the shift from 2014 to 2019, in terms of the centrality of Prime Minister Modi within both the BJP and the wider NDA, is patently visible (see Table 4).

In as many as 18 states, one-fourth of those who voted for the BJP stated that their voting choice would have changed if Modi were not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the party.² If a comparison were to be made with 2014, at that point of time in only 10 states,³ did one-fourth of the BJP voters state that they would have changed their voting preference if Modi had not been the NDA's Prime Ministerial candidate. The only state that is in the list in 2014 and not there in 2019 is Assam. If the same data were to be looked at from another angle, in seven states of India,⁴ more than one-third of those who stated that they voted for the BJP said that they would not have done so if Modi had not been the Prime Ministerial candidate.⁵ In Karnataka, Odisha and Bihar, more than half of those who said that they had voted for the BJP said that they would not have done so if Modi were not the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate.

Interestingly, in the Hindi heartland—the earliest region to sway towards the BJP, the deep roots that the party has appears to be more critically than the personality or leadership factor among those who voted for the BJP. Thus, in much of the Hindi heartland save Bihar, the non-assertion among the BJP voters that Modi was the key factor in their voting is noteworthy. The presence of the party on the ground was a key factor driving support for the party. It is important to record that in several States of the Hindi heartland where BJP has a strong presence, like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, less than three of every 10 BJP voters,⁶ said that they would have changed their party choice if Modi were not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the party.

The trend among the supporters of the NDA partners of the BJP is relevant on this question. Nationally, one-fourth of those who voted for the NDA allies of the BJP stated that they would have changed the way they voted if Modi were not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the NDA. In two states, Bihar and Tamil Nadu, more than one-fourth of those who voted for the NDA allies of the BJP stated that they would have

² Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir (Jammu region), Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal

³ Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

⁴ Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir (Jammu region), Karnataka, Odisha and Tamil Nadu.

⁵ One-third is kept as the threshold as this is the national average.

⁶ Lesser than the national average.

Table 4. Modi Impact Among NDA Voters

	Would Not Have Voted for NDA Had Modi Not Been PM Candidate (%) 2014	Would Not have Voted for NDA Had Modi Not Been PM Candidate* (%) 2019
BJP voters	27	32
BJP allies' voters	20	24

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

changed their voting preference if Modi were not the NDA's Prime Ministerial candidate. In Maharashtra, this factor does not seem to have been critical among the supporters of the NDA allies of the BJP.

Comparative Importance of Party, Candidate and Prime Ministerial Nominee in Voter Choice

How much did the party, local candidate or the Prime Ministerial candidate matter for voters when deciding whom to vote for?⁷ The NES 2019 Survey found that for four of every 10 respondents the party mattered more than the candidate, while for every three of 10 respondents, candidate was more critical than the party. For yet another close to two of every 10 respondents the Prime Ministerial candidate was the most crucial factor.

In the case of the supporters of the BJP and its allies, local candidates seemed to be the least important with close to seven of every 10 stating that it was either the party or the prime ministerial candidate. In the case of the supporters of the Congress and its allies, the party was the most critical factor followed by the candidate with the Prime Ministerial nominee not being a key issue. For the supporters of the Samajwadi Party (SP), BSP, Left Parties as well as state based parties, party appeared to matter most followed by candidate with the prime ministerial candidate being of very little significance (see Table 5).

If one were to assess the preferences of the BJP voters, in as many as eight states, the local candidate was considered as important by less than one-fourth.⁸ In 12 states,⁹ among those who voted for the BJP, more than one-thirds stated that the Prime Ministerial candidate was the most crucial factor. In another 13 states,¹⁰ more than four of every 10 BJP voters said that the party was the key factor in deciding their vote choice. Thus for those who voted for the BJP, the party and the prime ministerial candidate were key factors that propelled their choice. In the case of the Congress, its allies, Left parties and state based parties, the party and candidate took primacy over the prime ministerial candidate. It is also important to record that for the BJP supporters, the Prime Ministerial candidate mattered the most when they were dissatisfied with the performance of the local MP. More than four of every 10 BJP voters who were dissatisfied with their local MP, voted for the BJP on account of the Prime Ministerial candidate.

⁷ This is a separate question as compared to the Prime Minister choice question. Here the respondents were asked to choose between party, candidate and Prime Ministerial candidate on what mattered most while voting.

⁸ Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

⁹ Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

¹⁰ Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

Table 5. What Mattered Party, Local Candidate or Prime Ministerial Candidate

	Party Mattered More than Candidate (%)	Candidate Mattered More than Party (%)	PM Candidate Mattered Most (%)*
Overall	43	31	17
Cong voters	52	36	7
Cong allies voters	46	43	7
BJP voters	39	27	30
BJP allies' voters	35	30	31
SP and BSP voters	52	30	11
Left voters	57	25	14
Others' voters	47	35	8

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

Leadership in Context

Another binary logistic regression model was used to understand the role of leadership in the 2019 BJP victory. Factors such as preference for Modi as prime minister, what mattered when voting—party, local candidate or Prime Ministerial candidate, would people have continued to vote for BJP if Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate, states in the Hindi heartland and the impact and states having a clear bi-polar party contestant are included in the regression model. The result of the regression analysis shows that voters who prefer Narendra Modi as PM over other political leaders were clearly more likely to vote for BJP. The odds of voting for BJP among these voters were 25.058 times greater than the odds of the voters who prefer other political leader to be next prime minister. It is also evident that for those for whom the local candidate was of more importance than the Prime Ministerial candidate when deciding who to vote for, were less likely to vote for the BJP. In fact, they were 1.42 times more likely to vote for parties other than the BJP. However, preferring party over local candidate and Prime Ministerial candidate had no statistically significant association with voting for BJP. Yet another significant factor which project Narendra Modi as a pull factor in increasing BJP's vote share was that people would not have voted for the BJP if Modi were not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the Party. Those who have voted for the BJP in the name of Modi were 1.602 times higher than those who said that Modi's candidature would have not made any difference (see Table 6).

The BJP secured more vote from the states where BJP was in bi-polar contest. In bi-polar states as compared to states having multi-polar contestation, voters were 2.734 times more likely to vote for the BJP than other parties. Similarly, voters in the Hindi heartland were found be more inclined towards BJP than other parties. The odds of Hindi heartland states voting for BJP were 1.117 times greater, than other Indian states. From this model it is possible to assert that leadership was very much a driving factor that led to Minister was a critical factor. The odds were higher for this particular variable in the presence of other variables.

Yet one cannot lose sight of the other important variables that need to be factored into any comprehensive analysis of the BJP victory (Shastri, 2019a). Two caveats need to be added to this argument. First, in the Hindi heartland, the support for the BJP as a party was consistently strong. In many parts of this region, the BJP supporters opined that they would continue to vote for the party even if Modi were not to be the Prime Ministerial candidate. Second, there are large segments of the country, where the Modi factor did not seem to hold sway. In the India south of the Vindhya and segments of eastern India, the positive influence of the Modi factor in swaying voter preference was not evident. The political diversity of India, does not permit a sweeping generalization to be made of the trends across the country.

Table 6. Logit Regression Analysis of Vote for BJP

	Vote for BJP			
	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)
Prefer Modi as PM	3.221***	0.049	4.251E3	25.058
Preference while voting reference category PM candidate			44.334	
Prefer for Party	-0.086	0.056	2.341	0.918
Prefer for candidate	-0.354***	0.059	35.349	0.702
Not voting for BJP if Modi is not the Candidate	0.471***	0.045	110.047	1.602
Hindi heartland	0.110**	0.046	5.805	1.117
Bi-polar contestation	1.006**	0.054	346.967	2.734
Constant	-3.148	0.096	1.069E3	0.043
Cox and Snell R ² : 0.379				
Nagelkerke R ² : 0.513				

Source: Lokniti–CSDS National Surveys.

Note: *** 0.000; ** >0.000 but < 0.01.

Summing Up

The above analysis clearly indicates that in boosting the BJP vote share in the 2019 elections, the impact of the Modi factor was patently obvious. The sharp rise in the support for Modi as the preferred Prime Ministerial candidate and its translating into votes for the BJP and its NDA allies was visible. Further, the rise in the percentage of BJP supporters (as compared to 2014) who said that they would have changed their party preference if Modi had not been the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP is also evident.

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