

# [***India heads to the polls in world's biggest election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BV1-DDH1-DY7V-G005-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

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**Byline:** By Helen Regan, Rhea Mogul and Kunal Sehgal, CNN

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**Body**

Muzaffarnagar and New Delhi (CNN) &#8212; Polls opened Friday in the first and largest phase of [*India's*](https://www.cnn.com/world/india) marathon [*election*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/india/india-general-election-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html), in which populist [*Prime Minister Narendra Modi*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/15/india/modi-profile-india-election-intl-hnk-dst/index.html) is widely expected to secure a rare third consecutive term and deepen his historic transformation of the world's most populous nation.

About 969 million people are eligible to vote in the biggest democratic exercise in human history, with polling taking place in seven phases over the next six weeks. Votes will be counted on June 4.

It is considered among the most consequential votes in decades, with Modi's powerful right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seeking an outright majority in the lower house of parliament, or Lok Sabha.

An emphatic win for the BJP would give the party a mandate to further enshrine its Hindu-nationalist agenda, pulling away from India's secular foundation toward majoritarian rule.

Opposing the BJP juggernaut is an alliance of more than two dozen parties, including India's main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, which are campaigning to reduce inequality and uphold what they say are India's at-risk democratic institutions.

Throughout its decade in power, the BJP has come under scrutiny from rights groups for its increasingly strident brand of Hindu nationalist ***politics*** and an ongoing crackdown on dissent and democratic freedoms.

Yet Modi and his party have been buoyed by levels of popularity not seen in decades. According to 2023 [*Pew research*](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/08/29/indians-views-of-modi-and-other-national-leaders/), about eight-in-ten Indian adults have a favorable view of the prime minister.

Since coming to power in 2014, Modi has overseen massive infrastructure spending, building highways, power plants and maritime projects, as well as subsidizing the construction of millions of concrete homes for improvised families.

"The BJP has developed the country significantly in the past ten years. Corruption and crime has decreased drastically. What more can we ask for?" Aditya Garg, 29, told CNN from a voting station in Muzaffarnagar, in Uttar Pradesh.

Under Modi's leadership, the country of 1.4 billion people has become the [*world's fastest-growing*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/economy/india-gdp-growth-economy/index.html) major economy and a modern global power.

Despite these successes, soaring youth unemployment and inequality remain stubbornly persistent problems, particularly in rural areas, and critics say Modi has driven religious polarization, which has included rising Islamophobia and persecution of the country's 230 million Muslims.

Modi has walked a fine line geopolitically, placing India as a crucial counterpoint between global powers, and the Unites States, Russia and China will be watching the election closely.

As polls opened Friday, the leader had a message for voters.

"I urge all those voting in these seats to exercise their franchise in record numbers," he wrote on X.

What is Modi promising?

Modi has set an ambitious target to secure a 400-seat supermajority, with 370 directly controlled by his BJP - up from 303 in 2019 - and the others from its National Democratic Alliance.

The BJP's campaign manifesto centers on job creation and anti-poverty and development programs, with particular focus on women, the poor, young people and farmers.

Modi wants to turn India into a global manufacturing hub, continue its massive infrastructure transformation, and achieve energy independence by 2047.

Worth $3.7 trillion in 2023, India is the world's fifth largest economy, having jumped four spots in the rankings during his decade in office. Modi has pledged that India will have the world's third largest economy during a possible third term.

However, economic successes have been slow to trickle down to the country's poorest and India's gross domestic product (GDP) per person is ranked a lowly 147 in 2022, according to the World Bank.

"Everything has become so expensive; how can poor people survive in this climate? I think it's time for a change," said Irafan Mohammad, a Muzaffarnagar rickshaw driver, who has four children and earns $6 a day.

Modi wants India to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, will push to bid for the 2036 Summer Olympics and aims to land an astronaut on the moon, and has pledged to transform the country into a developed nation by 2047.

Who are Modi's opponents?

Challenging him is the country's main opposition, the Indian National Congress, a party instrumental ending nearly 200 years of British colonial rule and one that has governed for much of its independent history.

But over the last decade, it has struggled to find relevance, unable to break through the popularity of India's incumbent leader.

Rahul Gandhi, the son of the famed Gandhi dynasty is the face of the party. He lost the past two elections to Modi and will be contending once again from the southern state of Kerala.

In a bid to unseat Modi, the Congress last year joined hands with a number of regional parties to form the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, known as INDIA. But that alliance has started to see cracks emerge with a number of detractions to the BJP.

It has also yet to put forward a candidate for prime minister.

Opposition leaders and parties have faced a slew of legal and financial challenges in the run-up to this year's election, with many accusing the BJP of using state agencies to stifle and attack its opponents.

The arrest last month of the popular Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi and a staunch Modi critic sparked protests in the capital and prompted claims of a political "conspiracy" by his party.

Modi and the BJP have denied political interference, with one [*senior party leader saying*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/21/india/india-arvind-kejriwal-arrest-corruption-allegations-intl/index.html) it was a "process of law" to take "appropriate action against corruption."

However, Congress' manifesto has been dubbed one of India's most progressive, pledging "freedom from fear" and vowing to protect freedom of speech, expression and religious belief espoused in the constitution.

Who is voting?

Voters are casting their ballots for 543 seats in the lower house of parliament, or Lok Sabha, with a further two seats nominated by the country's president.

The party with the majority will form a government and appoint one of its winning candidates as prime minister.

On Friday, voters from constituencies in 21 states and union territories across India electronically cast their ballots. Some states are so big that voting is spread out over the seven phases, while others vote on one day.

Among the most politically important states is Uttar Pradesh, home to 240 million people who vote in all seven phases. India's largest state is a crucial battleground with 80 seats in the Lok Sabha up for grabs.

Home to the iconic Taj Mahal and India's holiest city, Modi's constituency of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh is also one of the country's poorest. And while some 38 million Muslims call Uttar Pradesh home, it is considered the BJP's Hindu heartland and growing increasingly divided along lines of class, caste and religion.

Aqdas Siddiqui, 26, is a businessman voting in Uttar Pradesh's Muzaffarnagar. He says though he's a Muslim, he'll vote for the BJP.

"They've brought in a lot of welfare schemes for the poor and Muslims are the biggest beneficiary. The government has also cut red tape and the country has become more business-friendly," he said.

However, many Muslims CNN spoke to said that they can longer accept being marginalized by the current government and voted for the opposition.

"A country is like a family, it can only develop if the head of the family treats everyone equally and doesn't discriminate," said Mehtab Ali, 54.

CNN's Manveena Suri and Esha Mitra contributed reporting.

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