

Growth is No 1 poll issue for voters, shows survey

Corruption is big issue in Bihar, UP; most others put economy above personal pocketbook gains

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In last week's piece, drawing on a new survey of Indian voters sponsored by the Lok Foundation, we reported on the stark shift among voters toward the BJP and away from the Congress. This week we ask what issues or concerns are underlying this change.

The overwhelming trend in our data suggests that the Indian voter is first and foremost pre-occupied with the broad state of the economy. We presented voters with a list of eight pressing issues and asked them which of the eight would influence their voting choice in the Lok Sabha elections the most. We find that for voters across India, economic growth and corruption unambiguously dominate all other concerns. Inflation follows closely behind. While there is significant state-wise variation, economic issues largely predominate across the board. This state-level variation swamps differences across other demographic categories, such as gender, age or education.

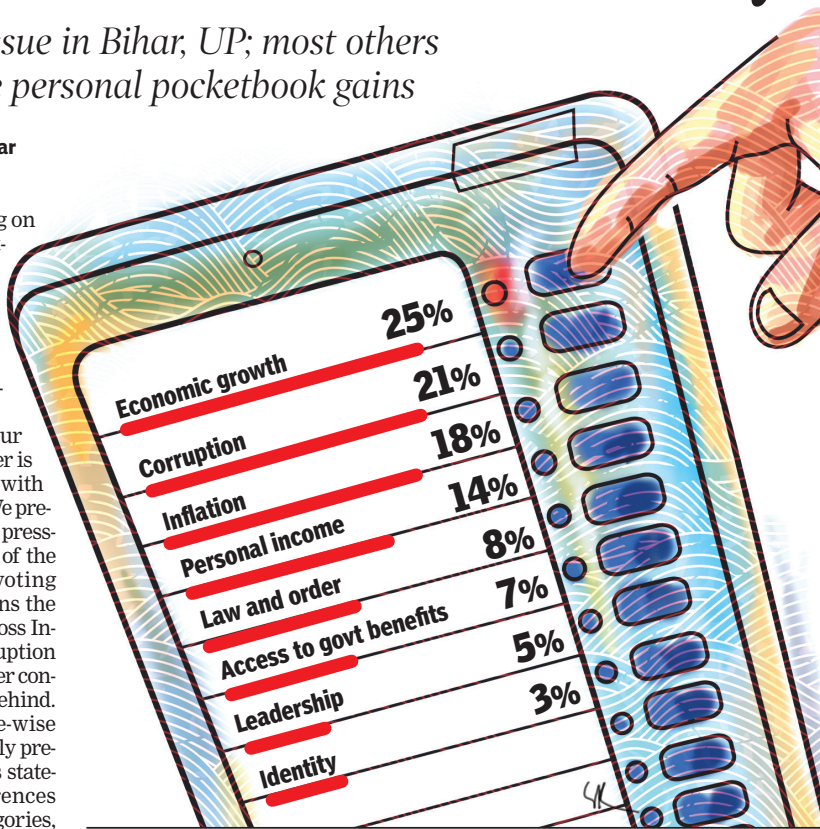
The strength of these preferences, combined with anti-incumbency sentiment, plays into the BJP's hands and the campaign rhetoric of Narendra Modi. Areas where the BJP and more particularly Modi himself have perceived weaknesses — on issues of identity and social welfare, for instance — are taking a backseat.

Across India, 25% of respondents stated economic growth would be their number one issue in deciding for whom to vote, four percentage points above corruption (graphic). Growth is the number one issue for urban (27%) as well as rural (23%) voters. Although the conventional wisdom in India holds that price rise is the most influential economic shaper of voting behavior, it ranks third (18%). "Changes in personal family income" is the only other response in the double digits (14%). The weight voters place on economic growth is instructive; it suggests that they care more about the overall macro-economic direction of the country rather than personal pocketbook gains per se.

Other important governance-related issues such as law and order and access to government services and programs was each the primary concern of a modest 7-8% of voters. And just 5% of voters care enough about "strong leadership" to make it the prime determinant of their vote choice.

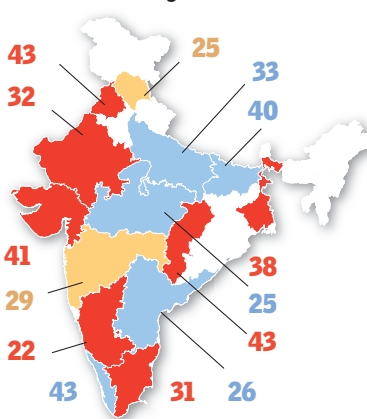
Voters' priorities in urban and rural areas broadly align — with small exceptions: rural voters understandably place greater weight on access to government services and programs and changes in their personal income, although these pocketbook concerns still rank well below larger macro-economic factors.

There is interesting variation in the intensity of preferences across states (graphic). Economic growth occupies the pole position in Chhattisgarh, Gu-



TOP ISSUES & STATES

■ Corruption ■ Economic growth ■ Inflation



Figures are in %

jarat, Karnataka, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. In the critical battlegrounds of Bihar and UP, economic growth is far down the priority list. Just 7% of voters in Bihar and 13% in UP prioritize growth, the two lowest rates in our sample of 15 states.

In these two large Hindi heartland states — in addition to Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Madhya Pradesh — corruption is the predominant concern of voters. Interestingly, voters in Kerala and Bihar — polar opposites on many socio-economic dimensions — are almost identically frustrated with corruption; 43 and 40% of respondents respectively claim concerns about corruption will most shape their vote choice.

In nearly all states inflation occupies a place among the top three issues (the two exceptions are Kerala and Rajasthan), but it is the absolute top priority in only two: Haryana and Maharashtra.

In the past, analysts have found

identity politics — operating along the axes of religion, caste and community — to be critical in shaping voter behavior. Yet the evidence suggests that such parochial matters no longer dominate, taking instead a backseat to considerations of governance — even in states where such factors are thought to dominate politics.

Three percent of voters feel "greater opportunity and respect for persons of my caste or religion" is important enough for it to be the principal factor shaping their vote choice. In nine states, including Bihar and UP, identity-based concerns rank eighth out of eight. In three other states, it ranks next to last.

Of course, a strong caveat is in order in interpreting the extremely low concern for identity issues. When voters are asked this question in the abstract several months before elections, they are much less likely to care for it. However, when faced with the identity of actual candidates at the time of voting, this will likely change. Identity politics is hardly dead in India. It is, however, considerably less potent than many political parties believe.

Young voters follow the above pattern. There are only slight differences in the priorities of men and women. Female voters are modestly more influenced by inflation than male voters while males seem to care more about growth. The latter difference is driven entirely by rural males, whose weightage to growth is higher than their female counterparts (24 to 21%).

Given that some parties are expressly wooing Muslim voters, are their concerns distinct from the concerns of other voters? Not so much. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the preferences of Muslims largely mirror the all-India pattern. The top three issues remain growth (22%),

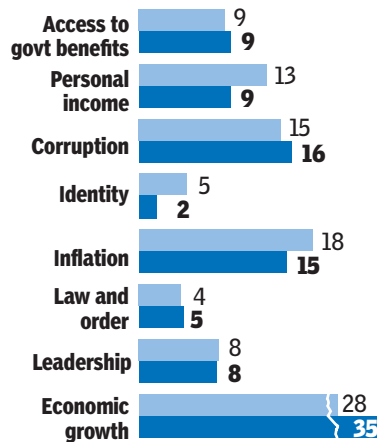
inflation and corruption (21% apiece).

The bad news for the UPA is that economic growth is a particular concern to those who voted for Congress last time but plan on switching their allegiance to the BJP: 35% of such switchers have marked economic growth as their number one priority, leaving aside the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where corruption is perceived to be much more pressing. This does not bode well for the ruling regional parties that govern those states. Furthermore, 28% of projected Congress voters who have not yet switched partisan allegiances believe growth is the order of the day. If this continues to hold, the Modi-led BJP has a large reservoir in which it can potentially make inroads.

Our data suggests that the UPA government's focus on delivering greater benefits to the poor, especially the rural poor, may have been compromised by broader economic developments. The lack of bargaining power on the part of the poor means that they face the brunt of erosion of real wages with high infla-

What is driving voters from Congress to BJP?

■ 2009 vote: Congress ■ 2014 vote: Congress



Figures are in %

tion and their powerlessness make them easier prey for corruption. What the UPA gave to the poor with one hand — with schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme — it took away with the other hand through poor macro-economic management that has resulted in stubbornly high inflation. Unlike 2009, it seems the electoral dividends of these schemes for the UPA will be slim.

The reality that economic growth and corruption concerns are by far the dominant concerns of voters, while partly contingent on the current situation, is a pointer to the structural changes taking place in Indian society. These are not simply concerns of urban voters. Even though official data may indicate that India is still largely rural, multiple factors — migration, electronic media, cell phones and better rural connectivity in general — are reshaping the aspirations of rural India to a greater extent than many Indian politicians and intellectuals want to believe. And these are finding their way into their vote choices — but not yet in the thinking of many political parties.

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Details of the survey at: <http://indiantransition.com/>

(This is the second of a four-part series)