

U.S.-India Insight

VOLUME 8 | ISSUE 2 | FEBRUARY 2018

India's Big April Elections

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As India enters election mode once more, most attention is paid to key state elections upcoming in 2018, as well as the national election expected in the spring of 2019. Yet in April 2018, another set of elections will have powerful repercussions for India's governance: the election of 55 members of the upper house of Parliament, or the Rajya Sabha. This is around 22 percent of the body's total strength and critical to the Narendra Modi government's ability to enact a robust legislative agenda and for the Congress Party to retain a voice in shaping that agenda.

The Rajya Sabha remains a poorly understood body. Not long ago, it had been referred to as a "rubber stamp." After the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) stunning triumph in the 2014 Lok Sabha (lower house) election, there were predictions that the party would control the Rajya Sabha by the end of the five-year term of the Modi government. If legislation faltered, analysts predicted the Modi government would call "joint sessions" to usher through its reform agenda. These predictions turned out to be inaccurate.

The Congress Party has used its large presence in the Rajya Sabha to block some legislation. Despite winning key state elections in the last three years, the BJP still only controls 24 percent of seats in the Rajya Sabha, which is far from a majority, even counting coalition allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). And the Modi government has not called for a single "joint session of Parliament." It has been aided by the fact that Congress has largely been a responsible opposition party, supporting many important legislative reforms such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

Membership of the Rajya Sabha changes slowly. Members are elected by the respective state legislatures for six-year terms on a rolling basis (e.g., approximately one-sixth of seats are set to open every year). The BJP only controlled five states at the time of the party's 2014 Parliament victory. And Rajya Sabha members are elected in rough proportion to the seat holding by parties in each respective state. So, simply having a majority in a state legislature does not equate to electing every Rajya Sabha member from that state.

KEY DATA

+9.8%

U.S.-INDIA GOODS TRADE, 12-MONTH YOY
COMPARISON, PER [U.S. CENSUS BUREAU](#)

-5.9%

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT, 12-MONTH
YOY COMPARISON, PER [RBI](#)

+30.4%

FII ASSETS UNDER CUSTODY, 12-MONTH
YOY COMPARISON, PER [NSDL](#)

The BJP has strengthened its hand in securing seats in the Rajya Sabha through a series of victories in state assembly elections. The BJP has moved from controlling 5 states at the time of the 2014 national election to controlling 14 states today—not counting coalition partners.

This slow evolution and “rolling election” style make April 2018 particularly significant. Fifty-five seats, around 22 percent of all seats in the Rajya Sabha, are up for election. The BJP holds 18 of these seats, and Congress holds 14. They include seats in states that have changed hands in the last six years, including Andhra Pradesh (3 seats), Haryana (1), Karnataka (4), Maharashtra (6), Rajasthan (3), Telangana (1), Uttar Pradesh (9), and Uttarakhand (1). The BJP’s state election victories in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan should translate into substantial seat gains in the Rajya Sabha election. Similarly, the Congress Party and the Uttar Pradesh-based Samajwadi Party (6 seats from Uttar Pradesh currently) will see a reduction in their seat share in the Rajya Sabha.

Despite expected seat gains for the BJP in these April elections, the process of altering the power structure in the Rajya Sabha remains slow. The BJP will likely gain around 9 of these 55 seats in this election cycle. But that still puts the party’s overall total in the Rajya Sabha at 67 seats—about 27 percent of the body’s total strength. Adding together seat totals from NDA allies such as the Akali Dal, Shiv Sena, and Telugu Desam Party, and the coalition will only be at 35 percent of the body’s total seats.

The April Rajya Sabha elections are not getting as much attention as the key state elections later in 2018 or next year’s national election. But with a stalled agenda related to important labor and land acquisition legal changes, the Rajya Sabha’s membership is an important component of the Modi government’s ongoing reform agenda. With these April Rajya Sabha elections, the BJP and its NDA coalition allies are expected to gain ground. But even with expected levels of electoral success, they still have a long road until the coalition can exert a majority vote in the Rajya Sabha—if ever.

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MODI’S REFORM SCORECARD

This month: Many key reforms require legislative action, and we update our reforms scorecard regularly. Our entire reforms scorecard can be found at indiareforms.csis.org

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