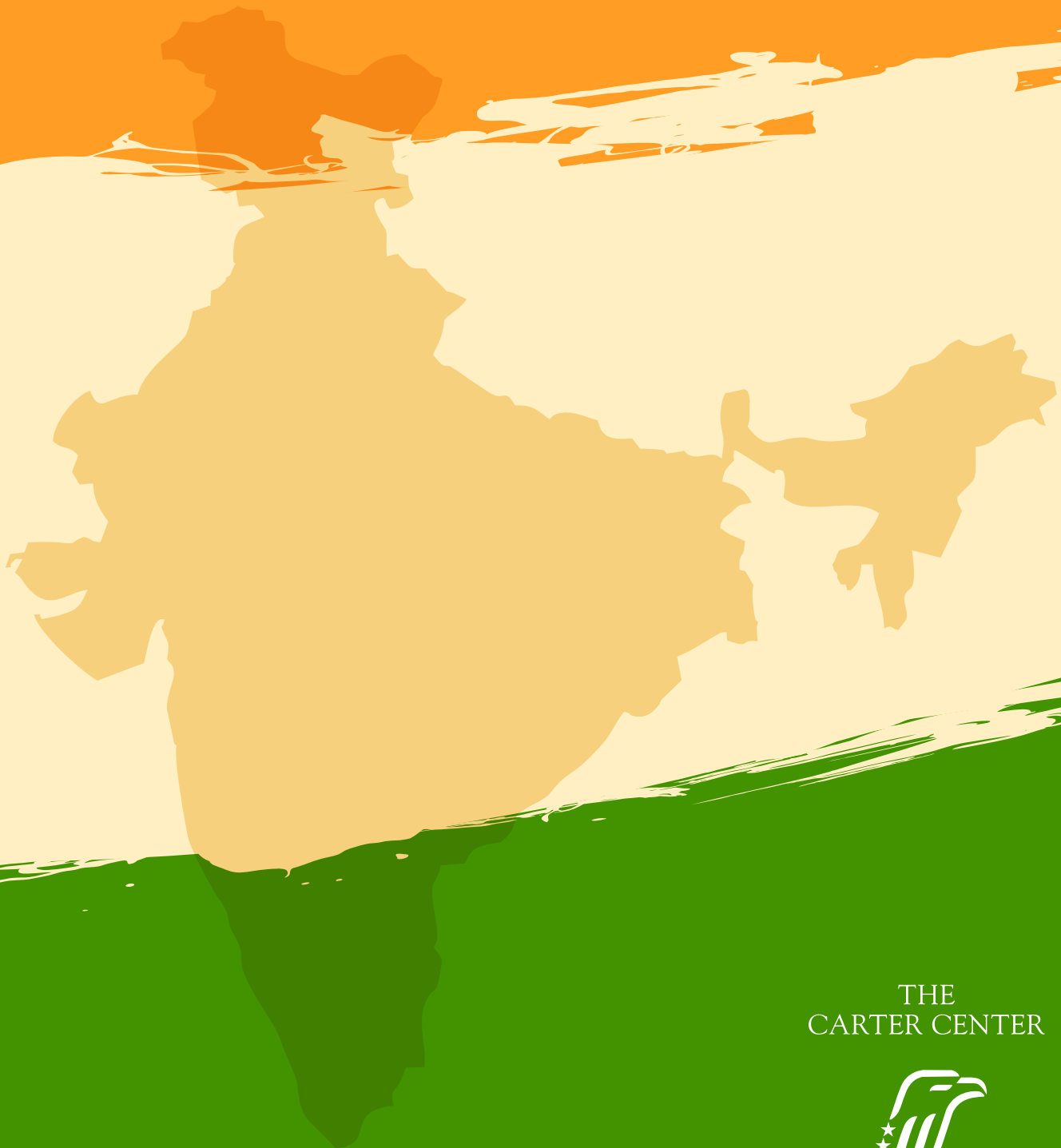


INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

Democracy and the Political Dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party

*By Anjali Thomas
December 9, 2022*



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Introduction

Although India has long enjoyed the distinction of being the world's largest democracy, in recent years many [observers](#) have described India as undergoing "democratic backsliding." This situation poses a challenge for the U.S. The Biden administration has sought to maintain a healthy partnership with India to further [important shared interests and geopolitical goals](#). At the same time, the administration has expressed a commitment to uphold democracy globally and [has faced domestic pressure to address India's deteriorating situation](#).

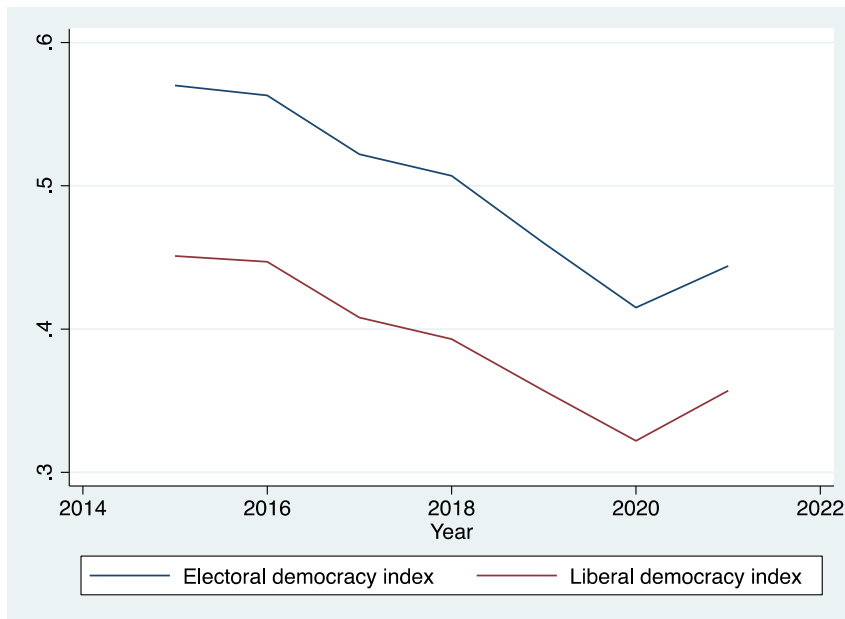
Perhaps because of these competing pressures, the U.S. has often waffled in terms of its approach to India's democratic backsliding. At times, U.S. government officials have [seized the opportunity](#) to speak about the Indian government's civil liberty violations, while at other times they have [shown reluctance](#). The question on the mind of many observers is: Can the U.S. succeed in persuading the Modi government to strengthen democracy in India? And, if not, how should the U.S. address India's democratic backsliding?

This article seeks to address these questions by analyzing the root causes of India's democratic backsliding. It suggests that although the recent undemocratic turn of events in India can be largely attributed to the rising political dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party, there are other factors at play underneath the surface. Namely, the BJP's dominance has been achieved through a potent mixture of both undemocratic means and an ability to win over large sections of the voting public in competitive elections through strategies that parties even in well-functioning democracies employ.

Root Causes

The evaluation of India's democracy by the [V-Dem Institute](#) reveals that India's democratic backsliding began around 2015 and has accelerated since (see Figure 1). These trends coincide closely with the rise in the political dominance of the India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which assumed power at the national level in 2014 with a single-party majority. In turn, it is the party's electoral success — and the level of control that it affords the party over the state apparatus at various levels of government — that has enabled the pursuit of a Hindu nationalist agenda involving [violence against minorities](#) and violations of their civil liberties as well as persecution of [those who disagree with the government](#).

Figure 1: V-Dem Indices for India - Electoral Democracy Index and Liberal Democracy



Despite experts' current focus on India's democratic backsliding, a key point is often forgotten: the BJP has achieved its political dominance not only with undemocratic methods, but also by achieving success in competitive democratic elections. In particular, the party has successfully used a variety of strategies — from [selecting candidates according to local caste equations](#) to [the provision of basic services through grassroots affiliates](#) — to move beyond its traditional core Hindu upper-caste constituency and make significant inroads with [poor](#) and lower-caste voters.

This is not to suggest that a wider constituency has led to more policies for inclusive development. In fact, although the Modi government is often credited for the success of numerous [government programs](#) designed to cater to the interests of India's poorer citizens, one of the country's most successful rural poverty-reduction programs, The [National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(NREGA\) scheme](#), was initiated by the previous Congress government and has [experienced a decline under the Modi government](#). Meanwhile, the performance of several of Modi's flagship programs — such as the [Swacchh Bharat Mission](#) and the [Ayushman Bharat](#) scheme — has [not always matched the hype](#).

It is also worth emphasizing that the BJP's popularity continues despite, and perhaps even because of, its human rights violations and poor treatment of minorities. Indeed, many of these violations stem from the BJP's reliance on its paramilitary affiliates in civil society, which form the backbone of the party's organizational machinery and [are often integral to the party's electoral success](#). As a result, BJP leaders turn a blind eye toward and sometimes even tacitly condone some of the [most outright acts of violence against minorities committed by these affiliates](#).

The BJP's [support of Hindu nationalist goals](#) also likely helps the party consolidate electoral support among its core Hindu upper-caste constituency, whose members often identify with this ideology. Indeed, [my own co-authored research](#) based on a large survey in Bihar has shown that unlike in the case of lower-caste voters, upper-caste voters remain loyal to the BJP regardless of the caste or gender of the candidates the parties nominate. Of course, the BJP's support for Hindu nationalism may also alienate some voters, most notably Muslims and other minorities. However, [spatial demographic configurations at the constituency level](#) in many

parts of India have often meant that the BJP has been able to secure local electoral majorities without relying on votes from Muslims and other minorities.

American Engagement

As long as the above conditions hold, the Modi government's popularity will remain strong. Given its domestic popularity and its motivations to continue to implement its Hindu nationalist agenda, the Modi government has little incentive to change course. Thus, although the Modi government has demonstrated a clear interest in [cultivating closer partnerships with the U.S. and other democratic allies](#), the U.S. may need more than just diplomatic engagement to succeed in increasing India's willingness to address its democratic backsliding.

A possible solution may be for the U.S. to turn its focus to bottom-up approaches — finding ways through its own agencies to support private-sector and civil society organizations that could help support citizens in challenging the Modi government's attempts to violate civil liberties. Such grassroots support could prove crucial to protecting the well-being of India's Muslims and other minorities who may well continue to suffer as long as the Modi government remains in power using its current array of electoral strategies.

A ray of hope could emerge, on the other hand, if other parties are able to lure voters away from the BJP or if electoral configurations make it imperative for the BJP to seek votes from the minorities whom it currently seeks to marginalize. Perhaps paradoxically, then, the United States' approach to addressing India's democratic backsliding requires a greater appreciation of the democratic roots of the BJP's political dominance.

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